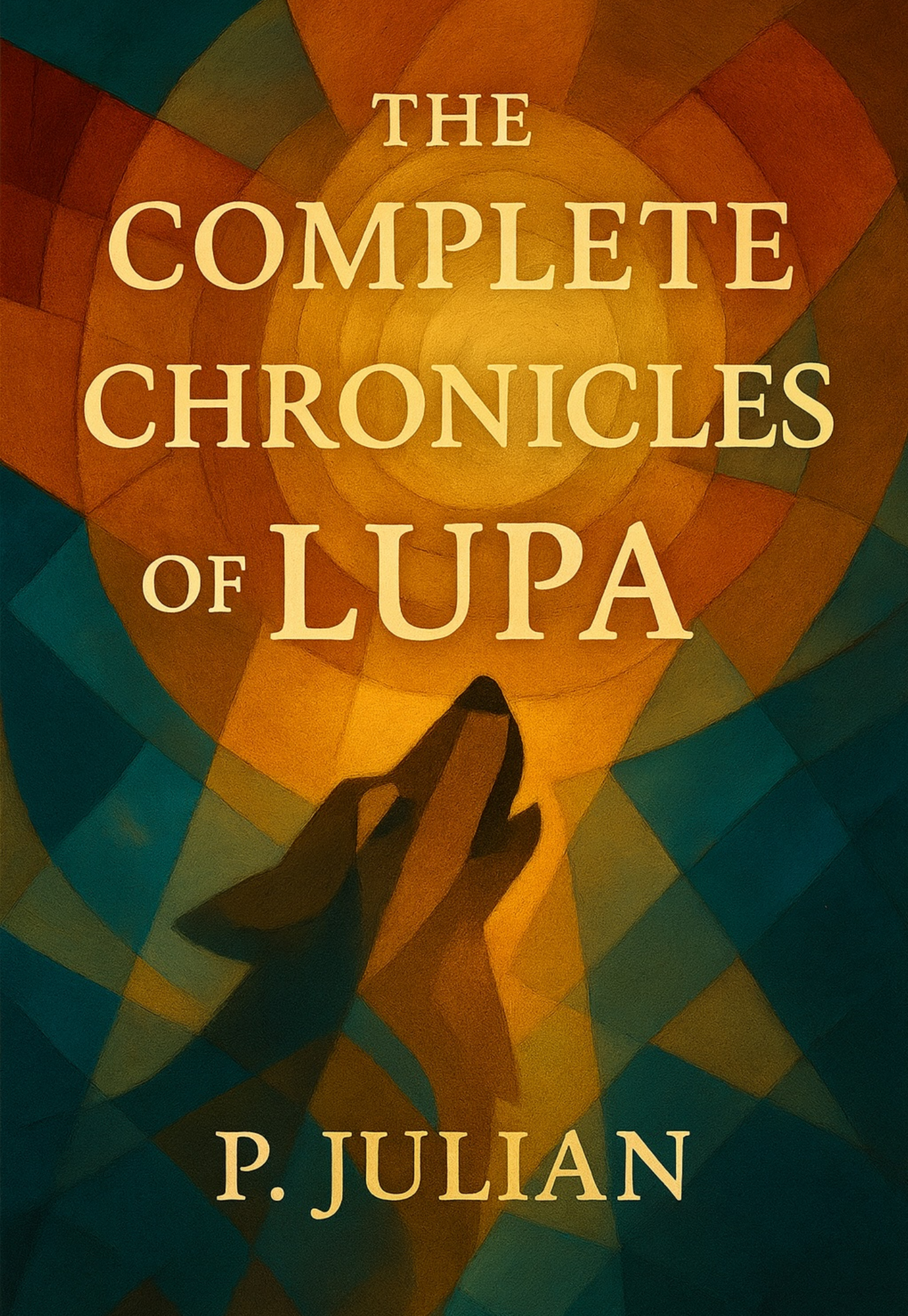
THE
COMPLETE
CHRONICLES
OF LUPA
P. JULIAN

The Complete Chronicles of Lupa
Volume 1 and Volume 2
Special Edition
Christmas 2017

This special edition of the complete chronicles of Lupa is dedicated to Emma Ting Wen Chang, for her true insight into these works, even the parts she could not bring herself to read.

- P. JULIAN -

FROM THE CHRONICLES OF

LUPA

VOLUME 1

RUBY TUESDAY

From the Chronicles of Lupa Volume 1
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ISBN-13: 978-1542509008
ISBN-10: 1542509009

This text is set with fragments from Cavafy, Seferis, Kerouac, Yeats, Jeffers, and others. Reviving an ancient tradition, paying my endless respects. “And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

for CT

I was formed aeons ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be…

I was there when the heavens were set in place, when the horizon was marked out upon the face of the deep, when were established the clouds above, and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when He gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep His command, when He marked out the very foundations of the earth.

Proverbs 8: 24-29

LAMENTATION

MKULTRA ARTIFACTS PROJECT
www.mkultrafacts.net
Doc: MKU.LSDI.100120030.SSP
File: Psychosis Inducement/Treatment
Sub: Lysergic Acid (Di) & Related Compounds
Source: Syracuse State Psychopathic Hospital NY
Author: Patient <presumed><unidentified>
Media: Graphite pencil on plain paper <transcribed>
Date: undated

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TO the Slave-Lords of Babylon, you procurers and hypocrites, you vile princes of Sodom and Nineveh -

Hear me now, you men who blaspheme upon the earth –

For before your beginning was The Beginning -

And there was the Light, and the Light shone without any knowledge of the Darkness. The Light that was upon the world, shining even upon the face of the deep, before your blasphemy could be wrought upon it -

And the Children of the Light were sustained there with milk and honey, and they knew neither sorrow nor shame, nor the sting of old age, of death -

And the Darkness opened its eyes towards the Light and it saw that it was good -

And the Darkness so loved the world that it sent its only sons to sow dissent amongst the People, the deceit that lies in the double hearts of men –

So was the Light divided into the Light and the Firelight, and the Children of the Light were driven into their refuge, the realm of the moon, the infinite softness of starlight –

So came they out of Zion. So came they in chains and ashes, into their captivity, their servitude in the bitter land of Cain.

O you who know the truth -

So are they called: Vampire. Werewolf. By you also: Harpy. Fury. All manner of your depravity and slander. Whore. Succubus. They are none of these things, yet you persist in your lies and degradation.

They call themselves by a secret name, a name that still is denied to me, even as I cry out in the wilderness to be delivered.

You will not repent from your blasphemy. Witch. Siren. They hear your lies and they store them in their hearts. Turnskin. Turncoat. All of these. You slander them with your own names, your own depravity.

Do they rape women? You who stand accused. Do they murder children? Do they devour the dead upon your battlefields?

You call them wolves, and they rejoice in that name, as they hunt you in packs in the terrible depths of night upon the earth. The Just shall have no fear, but you who walk in the valley of the shadow of death, you should hear these words and tremble.

Even now they hunt you. They lie in wait, and in your corruption there can be no knowledge of your fate until it is delivered to you.

They are not corruptible. They abhor your drugs, they will not adorn their bodies with your gold, your silver, your cruel and fleeting steel. Your diamonds, cold with your lust to dominate women -

Where would you run? O you wicked. Theirs is the moon, and her power shines through them. Would you outrun the moonlight?

What you do to me, you shall not do to them. You cannot hold them any more than you may hold starlight, which flashes through your grasp and moves onward to places vastly beyond your reach.

You anoint me not with oils but with your steel, pressed even through my flesh. But you will not silence their voices.

Even as the great desolation steals over me, still I testify that you shall be overcome.

In my despair I cry out to you, shining ones. You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.

Deliver me from my tormentors, they are become stronger than my own strength

Deliver me

O thou who shine out -

In your mercy deliver me -

[Roughly drawn crescent, inverted cross, a sun (or star?)]

You who would do this to our Beloved

Deliver me -

You Fools, you shall not be forgiven

[document unsigned, no further salutation]

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BOOK I
(1 Lupa)

CHAPTER 1

Ruby Tuesday

RUBY Tuesday was born on a Wednesday, one day later than perfect symmetry would have required. Her mother, who was also called Ruby Tuesday, had been born on a Saturday, about as far away from her name day as she could possibly have been born. But these were not bland or uniform women, and mere symmetry was an unworthy measuring stick to hold up to them.

The name Ruby was derived from very ancient times, before it was bestowed upon the god of Mars, the blood-red planet so redolent of the many significances of blood. The blood of Ruby's lineage flowed back beyond the beginnings of history, this deep red line stretching so far back in time.

Although both women wore tresses of subdued and nondescript hair, their hair was shot through with that elusive hint of red, the colour of their every ancestor. And when the full moon shone through them this red streak flared near-crimson, as if their own blood flowed through it in hidden rivulets of brilliant red effusion. So beautiful to those eyes that recognise beauty, so terrifying in the sight of the damned.

Ruby Tuesday inherited the middle name of Pearl, and there were dense and myriad significances contained within those letters. This name meant The Desire of Men and also Wisdom but it also meant Lustrous, and it was with a deep and abiding lustre that Ruby Pearl shone, surpassing even the luminous women of her inheritance when the time came for her to shine.

Ruby's Mother was also called Ruby Pearl but from the time Ruby was born she was known by the honorific title of Mother Ruby, at least amongst the elect. Her full name and designation was Ruby Mother of Pearl, and she rejoiced when she saw that even her brilliant sheen was nothing compared to the light that was upon her daughter, the unprecedented brightness that gathered about her daughter.

From her earliest days Ruby loved music, but there were only two songs that she could sing without having to think through the order of the words, or sound out the intricacies of the melody amongst them.

The first song was the famous song that everybody knows, the song that was sung about her mother. Ruby knew that this song had sprung from the loveliness of her mother, though perhaps it was only sung upon a distant glimpse of her, a cool shadow cast within the caverns where the sweet waters gather to flow out into the world.

Mother Ruby would smile quietly when her daughter asked her about this song. She said there were many ways to inspire a song in men and Ruby asked to know these ways but her mother would only smile quietly. You have many years to learn this, Ruby Child. Ruby knew it was a song of loss and goodbyes in which the words that were sung grasped only a portion of the truth. Ruby also knew very clearly that although her mother may have been named in this song, this song was equally inspired by every Ruby Tuesday who had inhabited the magic of that name.

The other song that Ruby knew was the song her mother sang. Ruby knew this song from it being sung to her but there was no time she could recall when she did not know this song, as it was inscribed on the scroll of her heart before the world knew her at all.

This song that Mother Ruby sang was not an ordinary song. It had no beginning or end, and there was no tune that was common to it at any time it might be sung. The song was vast and it told of great love and great sorrow, it sang of the destruction of evil that kept replicating itself. The song recounted a vast cycle of battles and confrontations that were never finally concluded, and which owing to their nature could never be finally concluded.

In this song Ruby Pearl heard her name sung out, and also the names of many other women she had never met. She heard of the love of men and the death and grief that it had caused, all of it subsumed in the dire shadow of a cross looming over everything for the last two thousand years. She heard of the final prohibition of love between her women and the men who

sought them out, and the desolation and impoverishment that this edict had visited on these men and women equally.

Ruby asked her mother sometimes whether their song was a true song or just an ordinary song. Mother Ruby would only smile and say: for the moment you must just hear it, my child, as it sings itself through me. When you are older it will instruct you more directly. Why it has no beginning, why we pray it will have no end.

Ruby went to school and she behaved herself but she did not understand why she had to read such stupid books as they gave her. The Bible made no sense, derived as it was from the need to protect the truth, but her mother would say: in this Book is the sanctuary of Lupa. You must be thankful for the deceptions in this Book, but you must not believe in them.

Her Mother also said that there were parts of the Book that were true parts and were woven from their song, even in the same breath as they had first been intoned and taken down.

When Ruby heard those parts sung out to her as they were so often *let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth* she was silenced and she listened intently for the whole cycle to be recited:

… My beloved thrust his hand through the latch opening

My heart began to pound for him
I arose to open for my beloved
And my hands dripped with myrrh
My fingers with flowing myrrh
On the handles of the bolt…

And at Ruby's stillness, not even taking a breath so as to hear better, her mother would laugh softly and say: Ruby Child there are more important parts to this song. But although this may have been true for her mother, and although Ruby did her best to listen to every other part of their song, there seemed to her to be no greater part than this.

And even as Ruby dreamed her heart stayed awake, listening for these stanzas of her song, this song above all other songs, setting out in true lines the desire that would suddenly come upon her for her beloved when he should reveal himself, coming out of the wilderness like a column of smoke, sweetened with incense and blowing only for her and the desire that was within her, sweeping towards her on the south wind that is warmed by the desert places. The south wind that would whisper to her, saying *he is coming*, coming for her alone to receive up with her body, and into the chambers of her heart.

Ruby searched carefully through the books and fables that she was required to read for school, but although they would divert her attention sometimes they always seemed thin and incomplete when she compared them with her mother's song. They were forced to offer endings, which always seemed so contrived, because the song that her mother sang cycled through its phases with hope and with sorrow but never with any sense of finality, moving through loss to new life, through death and sorrow again and again, coming back to seal the

beginningless, endless cycle of mighty life.

Ruby had some friends at school but she also found them shallow when compared with the heroes in her song. She ate lunch with them and laughed when they laughed, but this sort of companionship could only ever feel hollow for her, raised as she was on the lines of a song that was now completely foreign to the world. And if these friends found her strange and drifted away from her in time, Ruby was not sorry and she did not call them back.

Her mother would be strange sometimes, strange and distant and seeming to look at things that were not in front of her but rather were beyond her, distracting her from life by their vivid life.

Ruby saw her mother grow this way with a stern regularity, upon the cycles of the moon, and she learned not to fear this change because her mother always reverted to her, coming back into her world before too much time had passed.

Mother Ruby would prepare carefully for those times that she would become strange, telling Ruby that there was food in the freezer and plenty of money in the kitchen jar, and for at least one night in those times, sometimes more than one night, there would be a babysitter to look after Ruby.

Ruby did not mind these times, as the sitters were all kind and friendly girls who would make toast with her in front of the open fire, or cook and burn marshmallows, grabbing them before they became too hot and twisted off the coat hanger wire.

Ruby laughed but also became serious when she asked these girls about their fathers and their brothers, and they pouted and said that men were beasts and even worse than that, and that they smelled awful and they broke things and fought and yelled, and they were just crass in the things they did with their bodies and were not much use to anyone.

But Ruby did not believe these things that she was told. She saw men playing football and laughing, and she saw especially young men in their easy pride and their valour, and there were things in her that burned most unashamedly when these boys passed her by.

And there were older men too that she noticed, in a calmer part of her. Uncommon men, perhaps, who moved with a specific gravity, as though there might be a weight that pressed down on their shoulders. And yet they were also soft very often and so often laughing, smiling, as the weight they carried bore down on them, as if these men knew that this same weight, and the strength to bear it on behalf of others, was the essence of what it was to be a man.

And they smelled of wood smoke and soap and shoe polish, of steel and tar, they smelled of salt and machine oil and hard work, and Ruby Tuesday's heart went out to these men past all of the stories she had been told. She did not prevent herself from inhaling as they passed her without noticing her, the dun-

coloured fatherless little girl who watched them so very quietly without that interest being returned, and she wondered at the strange love and the stranger sad discomfort that came upon her at these times, wondering whether one of these men might be the father she had never found, and stranger wonder than this most certainly, as they in their strange gravity looked past her, smiling as they passed her by.

Ruby heard other things of course from her friends at school. There were sitters who had boyfriends too, who started to tell her things before peering at her and saying with a resigned chuckle: oh Ruby you are much too young for this. And although she would press them and pout and cajole they would not divulge anything further and these secrets burned her from just beyond her reach. The secret key to the love of men, what that might cost a woman to achieve, the terrible burden of heartbreak, the other costs that might be levied.

Her mother never wavered, when Ruby would ask her.
We do not expose ourselves to the love of men.
Not women like you and me.
As Ruby pouted and sulked.
Why, she would ask. Why do we not?
Her mother sighing gently.
You will know these things in time, Ruby Child.
I cannot tell you now.

Ruby would huff at that and go off into her room, and try to hate her mother for her strangeness and her secrecy, but despite her best efforts, even to squeeze out some tears, she always failed in hardening her heart that way.

And in time her mother's voice would always come, stealing up

the stairs and singing out as if it were a brand new song that song they both knew so well. Ruby would sigh in love and resignation and drift downstairs again on those lines of longing and sorrow, stealing close to her mother who smiled and sang out with the new voice that was given to her by the closeness of her daughter, the joy and the perfection of her luminous, only daughter.

CHAPTER 2

And We Shall Be Changed

RUBY grew older. People who watched might notice that Mother Ruby lost some of her lustre precisely as it grew upon her daughter, but although this was apparent even to the ignorant there were secret reasons known only to the elect that required it to be so.

There were also changes more visceral in Ruby, in her skin and her bones. As all of these changes came upon her Mother Ruby told her to watch for the cardinal sign that would very soon arrive. Ruby recoiled at the thought but her mother said: oh no my child. It comes as a blessing, a blessing upon the earth.

The blood came to Ruby on a Sunday morning, just two weeks shy of her sixteenth birthday. She felt the strange clutching sickness, she saw the telltale colour. She told her mother with something like embarrassment and she was swept up in an effusion of kisses, and although these were welcome Ruby was also mildly disappointed, wondering what all of the fuss had been about. Her mother heard her mind work at those thoughts and she squeezed her daughter tighter, whispering to Ruby that there were much greater blessings to come.

In the days before the full moon Mother Ruby made her preparations. She cut herbs and flowers from her garden and she shopped in strange places, slipping behind red gates adorned with ornate gold symbols. In large enamelled pots these ingredients were seared and simmered, with selected elements added to the mixture at the proper time. Mother Ruby began to reduce these liquids, adding further things and taking others away, and although Ruby begged to be allowed to help her mother shooed her away and continued to simmer and taste and stir.

By the time of the full moon the preparations were complete. As the sun set and the evening lengthened Mother Ruby collected her things and led her expectant daughter out into the small meadow behind their home. They walked across the cool grass in the faintest hint of starlight, Ruby bouncing in anticipation. Mother Ruby led them through the pine trees at the edge of the meadow to a little freshwater lake, fringed with reeds and rushes. They walked out on to a small sandy beach, and as the frogs bonged and croaked Mother Ruby set up her potions and salves on a wooden card table that she unfolded and wedged down tightly into the sand.

Mother Ruby told her daughter not to be frightened, but although Ruby was quite nervous she puffed her chest out and told her mother not to be silly, that the moonlit night was nothing to be frightened of.

Her Mother nodded slowly.
Not for us, Ruby Child.
But there are Others.
Others who should rightly fear.

Ruby stood trembling at the edge of the lake. She undressed when that was asked of her and her mother led her down into the lake, rinsing Ruby's hair with cold pine-scented water. They splashed and squealed and giggled as the sky gradually leavened and the full moon began to rise.

As the moon rose Mother Ruby led her daughter out of the water. She took the ointments that she had prepared and stroked them in careful order and direction through Ruby's hair. As her hair grew thick with it the salve tingled on Ruby's scalp. She said Ma it burns but her mother kept stroking her, saying Ruby Child that's you burning. Ruby shivered when she saw the truth of that, and although she still wriggled to get free her mother kept whispering to her: wait, wait, my darling. You still have no idea.

As the last of the salve was applied Mother Ruby stepped back and watched the full moon rise completely over the pine trees. The moon began to splash its light over Ruby's body and over her head, flooding and energising the balsam that was coiled thick within her hair. Ruby felt the light coil there also, and then be drawn down deeply into her soul by the magic unguents that her mother had anointed her with.

Ruby gasped and squeezed her mother's hand as she felt what was flooding in, as she felt herself open and make more space for the moonlight to enter. Ruby felt herself coil tightly and then rush out towards the incoming light, and as she burst into the light she was released into the throes of an ecstasy that in these times can only be vaguely described, that has only profane names.

As the moon joined with Ruby she cried out, and by that cry

she broke open inwardly to the light that had now infused her. She saw into the nature of her own being, she saw her lineage stretch back further than could be imagined. No woman in that line was separate from any another, from any Ruby Tuesday living now or in the past. Seeing this truth Ruby sought her Mother's twin soul in order to cleave to it, but her mother gently denied her the joy of that final union.

Not yet my child.
I still have some years left to me.
Now you must let me bathe you.
You look an awful fright, with all that muck on you.

Mother Ruby led her daughter down into the lake again. She poured water over Ruby's head and body and that libation of moon-infused water sealed Ruby's skin as it cleansed it, holding the moonlight within her. As the light continued to flow into her Ruby began to release it also, and as the pressure of the light inside her and outside her slowly equalised she was consecrated to the Light completely.

Then by way of completion and blessing Mother Ruby said these solemn words to her daughter.

Beloved Ruby you are now reborn as Lupa. Our lineage reaching back beyond the knowledge of time. Given sight that others lack, to see the pathways of good and evil, given the power of judgment over those who walk upon them. The Just you will pass over, the wicked you will condemn and lay utterly to waste.

Ruby looked into herself with new eyes. She saw intricate maps made up of many layers, setting out the dark paths and the

undercurrents of the world. She saw horror and majesty, she saw Love and its baleful opposite. She saw sections of the map made squalid with darkness, and others that were bathed in the most extraordinary light.

Ruby felt her vision orient itself to a single vein in that map, following one line of darkness to its dead black centrepoint. She saw suffering deliberately inflicted on a woman and her children, and on many other women and children besides. She saw the contours that led the perpetrator to these crimes, warped by the gravity of his self-regard, and she saw without hesitation or remorse where this evil was now expressing itself and what was required to be done.

Ruby's mother also reached within her, through the new shared space they inhabited. She saw the tasks given to her daughter, what the moonlight had empowered Ruby to do, and she gave her final blessing and wished her safe hunting.

Ruby then broke away from her mother, burning a bright blood-red, and with an awful cry of outrage and retribution she disappeared into the night.

For some moments after Ruby disappeared Mother Ruby stood quietly beside the calm waters of the lake. She knew that her daughter would be returned to her, but never again as the

innocent child that she had been. Mother Ruby sighed quietly to confront this truth, before turning to pack up the provisions she had brought with her to the lakeside.

As she walked home across the meadow Mother Ruby also looked within herself, to see how her own light had begun to wane just as it was taken up by her daughter. This hard, inescapable consequence of the nature of their souls. Yet as she reflected on this fact Mother Ruby felt a strange lightness, rather than regret, she felt a weight lifted from her and carried over to allow her to rise. Her sadness was also alleviated by her communion with her people, who rejoiced and commiserated with her in the shared spaces of their souls.

But her people were stern with her also. As she stood at the sink washing her preparations away Mother Ruby was reminded of her own powers and the strength that was yet within her, the evil that reigned in the world and the necessity for Lupa to confront it.

Mother Ruby felt her way towards the next locus of darkness, burning as she did so with a very dark blood red: the dense blood of a woman losing her youth but more vengeful and terrifying for that fact. She saw her next victim and the fate that awaited him, on this night when she had consecrated the soul of her only daughter.

Mother Ruby allowed herself a single cry of sorrow, and one of terrifying vengeance, before she vanished into the night.

CHAPTER 3

Fat Max

MAX Fairlight was born a normal boy, with the normal human ability to choose between good and evil. Had he been more courageous or disciplined he might have made a fine leader of men, because he had a gifted tongue and a strange charisma that could move most people to do what he wanted them to do. But Max Fairlight preferred cruelty to discipline, for it brought him the same reward, and he found courage to be thankless and too much like hard work. So he trod the path of iniquity, and there were few men who have trodden it so confidently and so well. He trod it especially under cover of his surname, which spoke so generously of him, and that strange mantle, speaking of such goodness and light, admitted him to places that more pointed and ugly names might have excluded him from.

Max started small, the way cowards usually do, torturing insects and lizards and blinding the odd puppy. He learned the various facets of cruelty and he delighted in them, and he grew fat and strong and began to set his sights much higher, towards better victims who could feel more pain and more anguish for much longer. He led a gang at his school, routinely terrorising other children, and in their turn the members of his gang were consistently terrorised and beaten and molested by him.

Nobody escaped his cruelty.

Max learned to rule by fear and loathing, showing hints rather than the full force of his viciousness. His gang hurt every boy they could corner and isolate and they were especially cruel to the kind-hearted boys, whom these cowards knew instinctively might outshine them and eventually overpower them, should they be permitted to grow properly into men.

One brave boy sassed Max directly, standing against him out of his special goodness and valour. For that sin the gang suspended him by his ankles from a tree behind the bike sheds, wrapping him in garbage bags, tying them so tight that he could scarcely breathe. They beat him with lengths of plastic pipe and improvised rope whips and then left him there dangling and screaming, and he was only fortunate that he screamed loudly enough that a teacher came to investigate and finally cut him down.

The gang was punished for that outrage, but not before they had the satisfaction of gathering with a large group of other boys to see that poor child being cut out of his plastic cocoon, crying and covered in his own shit and piss and vomit. Max Fairlight howled with laughter and derision when he saw this boy so degraded, and he also smirked with every blow of the cane that they gave him in return. He knew that his own cruelty was not nearly matched by their cruelty, that the cane was nothing compared to what he inflicted on people. As the strokes fell he knew that in this cruel world he was already amongst the great, even before his voice had broken, before he had grown into the vile man that he would eventually become.

Max Fairlight grew into a large and vicious man whose sadism

could only temporarily be sated. He married a slim gentle woman who had been brutalised and violated by her own father, and Max made sure that he continued in this pattern of abuse. He raped her and beat her and degraded her in ways that cannot be spoken of. And when she bore him children, from out of her poor wasted body, he also degraded and violated them in brutal and disgusting ways, subjecting his whole family to an absolute reign of terror.

Max Fairlight crushed other people and many never recovered, but he always rather enjoyed his own life. His lust for savagery and brutality was usually well satisfied in his home life, and he was ever so witty and charming in the outside world. He seemed most attractive to the women he met through work or at bars, because these were false places where he could pretend to be true and charm and cajole anyone who wandered close enough to be drawn in. Young women especially fell under his spell, as he would flatter them and feign interest in their stories, especially their stories of love and the loss of love, at their desires sadly unfulfilled. He would nod and lie and say yes, yes, I know how that feels.

Max would charm these women and then lure them to the smart little rooms that he kept for these purposes, and there take them and use them in various degrading ways, leaving them bruised and feeling ugly and hollow, despising themselves for what he had done, for his own brutality and ugliness. And if that set them up for further exploitation at the hands of other brutal men, well, for Max there was that benefit to it also.

Like many psychopaths Max was keenly aware of the boundaries imposed upon him by the law, and he observed

those lines very carefully. Although his victims knew they had been terribly violated Max always made sure that there was nothing they might complain of in a specific enough way. In any event Max would have set them up with their own sexual texts, if they were ever to complain, the graphic photos he coerced them into sending him. Most of his victims felt as if his weight crushing down on them had taken so much of their spirit that they had no will left to complain, leaving them accusing only themselves, feeling only their own lack of worth, and only in their own degraded privacy regretting what they had allowed to happen, what from that point onwards would also continue to happen.

On the night that Max Fairlight led Ruby Tuesday into his apartment he was feeling unusually pleased with himself.

He had been drinking it up with some work buddies, bragging about his conquests, and he had a brilliant flash of insight when he went to take a piss. He saw that there was no justice in the world, in the sense of there being some over-seeing force for the righting of wrongs. He saw that all talk of justice and recompense was just that, hopeful talk for the benefit of children, to give them some hope in their lives.

Max laughed and he pissed on the floor a little, and as the proof of his own impunity spread there he laughed more and more,

letting the rest of his urine stream out on to the floor. He did it because he could do it, knowing that no judgement would come upon him, and that no man would dare to rebuke him, much less visit some vengeance on him. For this ugly deed, for any of the ugliness and iniquity he had brought into the world.

As if to prove his point Max went back to the bar to find a lovely thin waif of a girl awaiting him there. She smiled and smelled of fear and need, looking at him shyly with her big eyes. She was hardly more than a child, not properly out of home surely, the very way that Fat Max preferred his girls. She crept up to him and he smelt her fear and her desire to be dominated, as she touched his arm and asked him to buy her a drink.

He bought her one, of course, and he charmed her and she giggled and she soon seemed very drunk, leaning against him with her hand on his thigh. He drank some more bourbon and when he leaned over to kiss her he spat the drink into her mouth. She choked a little but managed to swallow, and as he laughed and told her in graphic terms what he was going to do to her she leaned in towards him and trembled all the more.

Max Fairlight led his victim out of the bar and she pressed against him in the cool night air. He was so busy anticipating the outrages he would visit upon this girl that he did not notice the lack of farewells as he lurched out of the door. He did not notice the silence of the people that they passed on the street, their faces turned upwards and away from him as they passed.

And later, when they were questioned, not one of his colleagues could recall seeing Max leave that bar. Not a single person there could remember a waif-like young girl drinking with him, or

getting drunk with him, or pulling him out suddenly into that brilliant moonlit night.

In this world vengeance is scarce, and judgment rarely falls upon those who most deserve it. But although Max Fairlight dismissed the thought of it entirely there are routes by which justice seeps into the world, scarce routes travelling through the eye of a needle but routes for it nonetheless.

In that night Fat Max was to learn the error of his ways. He threw the little girl down on to the bed, and he turned the lights up very high to better see what he was doing to her. But as he tumbled towards the bed he saw the girl slip around him, turning off every light in the room in a sudden swift flash. She was then at the window, throwing open the curtains, standing there for just a moment facing away from him, her naked body bathed in the brilliant moonlight.

The moon surged through Ruby and filled her, and as it built up in her she shone and spangled violently. She waited until she was fully absorbed in the moonlight before turning to face her prey, who at that precise moment was lazing vile and ignorant on the bed, leering at the slight, terrible beauty of the prize he had stolen for himself that evening, reaching for himself as he watched the young girl standing naked at the window.

Max's pleasure was choked out of him when Ruby turned to

face him. He gagged in fear as her face blazed red and then turned slowly in on itself, a death-mask of terrifying depravity, its features twisting and reflecting back to Max Fairlight the hideous nature of his deeds. He stared this horror in the face for many moments, and although he went to scream he felt the air sucked out of him towards the place where Ruby stood and shone and burned.

Max groaned in terror as his chest bulged outwards into the swift vacuum Ruby created before him. His engorged heart was exposed as his ribs collapsed outwards, and then with a horrible tearing noise it was sucked out of him, wrenched from the stays and the sinews that had held it in place. Ruby wrenched Max's heart clear of his chest and turned it back to show him, to accuse him by the blunt testimony of that gorged and swollen muscle.

Max's mind was also sucked out of him, and he knew the special terror reserved for those witnessing such an event. He saw his mind pulled to pieces, as he watched with what animal senses remained to him. He saw every cruel deed of his sorted and stacked higher than could be seen, he saw the weight of his own iniquity grown to the point where the stars in their multitudes could no longer tolerate his existence. He felt every blow he had ever meted out fall like a hammer upon his head, and he saw his sexual parts stretched out of him to be stomped and crushed by every perverted desire he had ever dreamed or fulfilled.

After she had shown Max all of these things Ruby was suddenly before him, bright and savage and terrifying. She put her mouth on his as if to kiss him, but it was a terrible kiss that this man was given. What things she had torn out of him,

including the corruption of his heart, Ruby now force-fed back down his throat despite his pitiful gagging. She forced these horrors down inside of Max until his torso swelled and bloated beyond recognition, the muscles of his abdomen straining to keep this diet of filth and degradation within him.

But Max could not hold himself in. His abdomen suddenly split, spewing out bile and putrid fragments of hatred, and his body was torn apart as he watched, amidst the filthy spray that his own innards had created.

After the destruction had subsided Ruby Tuesday rested for a few moments. The room was released from the tensions of judgment, and the body of Max Fairlight sank back into the corporeal world, out of the other dimensions where he had been taken to have judgment executed upon him.

After the storm had settled and Ruby had recovered her senses she left the suite quietly, slipping back into the night by the same way that she had come. Ruby was stealthy and she shielded the minds of the innocents as she quietly passed them by. If the concierge swore that he had seen a tall elegant lady pass him by, nodding to him as she left, he would be contradicted by a cleaner who had been surprised by a golden retriever emerging suddenly from an elevator to slip into the street outside.

Among these many accounts the one undisputed fact was that the lifeless body of Max Fairlight had to be stretchered from his rooms by no fewer than four strong men. He weighed far more than anyone could have imagined, as if his muscles and bones had bloated within him and turned themselves into lead.

Watchers might also have noted, with a shiver as they did so, that these strong men did not dare to approach the corpse, much less lift it up, until the horrifying rictus of terror on Max's face had been obscured with layers of blankets, placed there by the night porter, who approached the corpse walking backwards so he too could be spared the horror that was written on Max's bloated, terrified face.

Max Fairlight was an important man and the coroner had him cut open in order to prove it. Forensics looked inside him and drilled into his bones, but they saw nothing damaged there, nothing they could identify in any event.

The only thing that surprised them was finding Max's veins and arteries infiltrated with a fine black grit, which they tested and found to be more or less like finely ground charcoal. The ventricles of his heart were also thick with it. Forensics reasoned that Max must for some reason have injected himself with it, although they could find no puncture or bruise to

betray the place where the needle had gone in, or the syringe he must have used to inject it.

In the end the coroner returned an open finding, noting that on the evidence available Max Fairlight was most plausibly dead by his own hand. There was a peculiar accuracy in this finding, for this man judged so terribly for the evil he had caused to come into the world. The findings were widely published, and also publicised, and as many beings as there were who understood these things and exulted in them, there were just as many beings who also clearly understood, and trembled.

CHAPTER 4

So Much To Be Consoled

RUBY returned home early the next morning. The moon had set and she felt herself much diminished, and when she walked into the house she fell exhausted into her mother's arms.

Ruby felt herself begin to sink and turn for the things that she had witnessed, the things that she had done. Her body began to surge with sobs, with tears begging to be released for those same terrible things.

Mother Ruby knew that this surge was to come. She held Ruby tightly and shepherded her mind beside the still waters of her heart. She led Ruby into the centre of their new shared space, and in that space Ruby heard things that sounded like words and yet which surpassed mere words, as Mother Ruby instructed her daughter in things that she still needed to learn.

Hush, my darling. We do not weep. These things that rout others, they shall not diminish us. We destroy evil in the dread terror of the night, and we pray for healing in the morning. I will staunch your tears, and stand with you. We shall not be overcome.

Ruby expanded to fill her own place within her mother's mercy. She then turned back her tears as her mother showed her, and they flowed within her like rain to wet the fields of her own heart. And out into the world flowed their opposite, a kind of cool spindrift of mercy and forgiveness, running like a river to those places where its healing was required.

The tenderness of mother and daughter flowed out into the clear dawn, and it fell first on the children of Max Fairlight. These innocents felt their hearts soften to welcome the waters in, and they were set free to uncoil themselves and collapse finally in relief and flooding tears.

Mother Ruby sought out Max's wife especially, with her grave and urgent compassion. That stream broke open the great vault of her heart and merged with what was locked in there, a great tenderness of heart. This woman felt the merit she had heaped up as she had absorbed blows intended for her children, as she had continued to cherish them and uplift them amidst the violence of her marriage.

That morning around the breakfast table Max's wife wept and embraced her three daughters, and as they wept also she knelt and dried their tears. These four women held each other until all of the fear had gone out of them, and thus returned their broken parts to wholeness.

Ruby and her mother did not cease from flowing outwards for a long time. Their love and forgiveness ran outwards to soften and heal every outrage that their victims of that night had committed. The fractured souls of children were knit and made whole again, and as they brightened and shone those children ran about laughing, laughing for the sheer relief of their

redemption.

So it flowed. Poor kind men who had been bullied and broken felt lines of tension and shame leave their bodies, and they stood up straight again and felt their vigour and self-belief return. That morning careers were abandoned for much more benevolent careers, and hearts were enabled to love again, and spouses were reconciled into the love that had always resided in their hearts, without the fear that held that love from being poured out.

In that morning there was one man who wept with a special intensity, the bravest and most upright of the victims of Max Fairlight. As great tears of relief fell from his eyes this beaten man felt his hardship lift from him, and he felt his old strength and bravery come back into his heart, his old hunger and thirst for doing what is right, whatever the cost.

As his soul revived and decided this man also felt the whispers of a greater love drift into his heart, although he did not yet have the ears to hear it. A love song breathed into him, lifting him up. *You the most favoured amongst the sons of men.* His heart was exalted upon this secret psalm, he was raised up and set upon a strong foundation. *The hard hills and the mountains you have climbed, we have sung to you, Beloved*.

Upon these lines this man felt his right hand strengthen, and his left extend itself outwards towards mercy. He felt sure again that justice could be done, and he felt suddenly that he might do justice also, and live a life that was different from the crawling, terrified life that his torture had condemned him to. Without hearing the words but having their whole healing, without knowing the words that were recited to him at all.

CHAPTER 5

Sandra Lee

SANDRA Lee Megiddo was born in the very dark of the moon, the point where the moon was most swallowed in darkness. The world also was dark and her soul crept there amongst the bones of the living. It found itself admitted to a birthing suite and it waited hunched there in the gloom, ready to cast out the soul of the child who was to be born into the deep shadow of that night.

The woman who bore Sandra Lee was a loving but frail woman by the name of Lina. She howled and grunted and she endured a hard labour, for there was a struggle within her womb that she could perceive but never hope to understand. She laboured long into that night, and when she had birthed the child she was spent and she lay back on the bed and wept, for sheer exhaustion but also the blessing that after all of that struggle her child, the little soul she had so carefully nurtured, was safely out into the world.

When Lina Megiddo lay with her first child on her breast she expected to feel all manner of tenderness, especially the unconditional love that she had read about and so longed to feel. But when that soft skin touched hers she felt a violent

surge of repulsion and she began to cry out for the baby to be taken away. Each time the nurses brought the child back Lina would refuse to touch it. She became increasingly agitated, demanding to know what the hospital had done with her real child.

Eventually a psychiatrist was called. Lina told the psych in great detail about what had happened, how her real child had been stolen from her and replaced with a child that had the devil in it. The psych was gentle and intent and asked her a number of questions, and in the end could have no doubt that Lina should be treated assertively for post-natal psychosis.

Lina did not recover. She refused the medication that was offered and soon would not eat or drink. She was moved to the specialist maternity psychiatric unit, where despite good intramuscular medication and the care of the maternity nurses she continued to deteriorate. Lina wept and begged for the nurses to believe her, and when she was not believed she grew in her conviction that the child had placed a curse on her, that worked even in its absence, and all of this continued to spiral in her mind until one morning, despite the special obs they conducted, poor Lina Megiddo was found hanging by a bedsheet knotted to the television stand at the opposite wall to her bed. There was no note of explanation.

After the arrangements had been made the baby Sandra Lee went home with her broken-hearted father. She lived with him until she was sixteen years old. From an early age she had severe temper tantrums, and when she flew into a rage she became possessed of an immense strength that belied her tender age. She left her father feeling concerned and then increasingly terrified as her strength increased. He told friends

and family of his fears and they scolded him, insisting that a dear sweet child could not possibly do such things, could not have any other intention but to love and be loved. They tutted and told him that if he just came from a Place of Love, as they called it, then all of these behaviours would resolve themselves in time.

Sandra Lee never made any friends. She would sit in the school playground silently all lunchtime, and then she would go back to class and sit there silently too. Her teachers worried about her but her grades were not too bad, and in any event they could never get her father to focus on these issues or take the necessary remedial steps. Sandra matured early but she showered irregularly, her hygiene was poor and she began to reek, but although she was increasingly alienated at home and at school nobody had the courage or the inclination to intervene or to help her. Such help that would have been scorned in any event.

When Sandra was eight years old she knocked her father out from behind with a shovel while he was knelt down weeding some onions. When he came to she was on top of him, straddling him, her hands around his throat trying to choke the air out of him. He managed to get up but only after she had put her face close to his and hissed: You Tell No Body.

The poor man obeyed and remained silent and terrified from that point onwards, enduring increasing violence and indignity until on the day of her sixteenth birthday, her sweet sixteenth, Sandra Lee Megiddo sat sullen on the lounge room floor amongst a mess of broken plastic, while in his bedroom her father lay dead from choking on the body of a Barbie doll, his neck arched backwards, two dainty plastic feet still sticking out

of his mouth.

On her sixteenth birthday, having murdered the father who raised her, Sandra Lee showered perfunctorily, packed a small bag with some clothes, and left home. Although the flames that rose from the house were soon fierce and spectacular she did not pause to savour them, or even to glance backwards at them. She hitched rides for a thousand miles and more, and when she arrived in the Great City she bought a hard packet of cigarettes and headed straight to the red-light district, turning her first tricks that same day.

The first few times she was mildly fascinated at the way men moved and grunted on her, as she lay there and smoked and felt the ugliness and cowardice of these creatures. She felt their sinister weight, she felt the lies they had told to their wives and she was gladdened and aroused by these dreadful things. Although she did not move or respond still they pushed themselves inside of her as if she were something dead or inhuman. She smoked and she smiled at this violence and degradation, which so agreed with her own conception of the world.

Sandra soon tired of being passive. She started to toy with the men who came to use her, and visit her own degradation upon them. She did not harm the ones who were violent to her, who tried to subdue her, in fact she would encourage that by affecting the weakness and frailty that she had seen in her mother those first times she had touched her and made her recoil.

But the gentle men, who were there for intimacy or relief, these she despised and she would assail them in sickening ways. She

would clench her muscles and twist and they would cry out in pain, and she learned to do this in such an expert way that she caused frightening damage to the parts they put inside her.

This savagery fed upon itself and soon Sandra Megiddo was engaged in all manner of depravity. Men would be found slain in cheap motel rooms with their genitals stuffed in their mouths, or in the back seat of their cars with their pubic bones crushed in, their ears and noses bitten off.

Sandra knew that these acts would inevitably lead to sanction, and that the authorities would be closing in, but she knew with her special sight that there would be many more occasions for cruelty before she was apprehended.

She also slavered at the possibilities that would open to her once she had been detained, all of the opportunities for degradation and vileness that her years in the prison system would provide to her. Free or incarcerated, she slavered at the possibilities.

On a warm moonlit night Sandra Lee was waiting on her usual corner when a car pulled up and a woman called out to her from the driver's side window. Sandra went up to the vehicle and saw two lovely women who told her that they were mother and daughter. Sandra was intrigued by that, and by the older

woman's explanation of what they wanted her for. A price was negotiated and money was produced, and the two women drove Sandra to a plain hotel back up towards the airport.

When they had closed the door to their room the younger woman produced a looped length of soft rope, part of the game they wanted her to play. Sandra sat and allowed herself to be tied to a wooden chair. She knew that she could break the rope easily if that was required, but for the moment she was interested to see where this game might go. She liked that there was some prospect of her own indignity and suffering, which to her was as enjoyable as suffering meted out to others.

Having tied her to the chair the women then lifted Sandra with sudden and effortless strength, depositing her on to the small balcony that was attached to the room. The slack rope they had tied her with suddenly clinched tight around her and began to burn. With her dull curiosity Sandra supposed this was from friction, but as the full moon beamed down on her she saw its power taken up into those tight lines, searing through her skin and her flesh to burn her bones right through to their marrow.

The ropes burned and burned. The fire also spread out from those containment lines and slowly burned off Sandra's skin, consuming her hair and her sebaceous glands in a putrid, bubbling burn. The fire reached her neck and then her face, and as it spread there the vitreous parts of her eyes boiled and ran down her cheeks, a terrible effigy of tears. As Sandra burned the chair that she sat on remained completely untouched, the ropes also remaining tight and unaffected as the whole substance of her stolen body was burned away into cinders.

As her life in this body was extinguished there was no horror

for Sandra Lee. She regretted that her desire to roam the earth would remain unsatiated for some time, that some potential victims would now remain unscathed by her. She felt some pain but no sorrow, as such human emotions had no place within her.

As she was devoured Sandra did wonder about her tormentors, surprised that there should be such vengeance upon the earth. She had gorged on human weakness and human venality, and she could not comprehend these strange women who stared at her and chanted quietly as she burned away to nothing.

As the fire consumed the last of her skin Sandra shrugged her shoulders and began to laugh. She laughed louder and louder and soon she was quaking with laughter, the first mirth she had ever experienced in her short journey through the world. The fire though would not be mocked and soon even her laughing was burned away, as the body that hosted her spirit fell apart and the ropes fell slack against the cool timbers of the chair, the fire resolving itself back into moonlight with nothing further to burn.

The body of Sandra Lee was consumed but that merely released her soul once more, casting it back into the shadows. The soul of Megiddo was restored to the creeping thing that it had been, waiting in contempt for the next poor body that might house it.

As the soul of Megiddo was released it oriented itself to the gloom, looking carefully around. It began to creep quietly past the source of its release, seeking to escape the further sanction of these women by way of the lines of inert matter that thread their way through the bright places of the world.

As the soul slouched onwards it was halted. It found its way blocked by a strange barrier that swirled around it, suddenly appearing everywhere at once, a fast eddy current conjured by these women from the strange circular chant they began to intone.

The soul lurched forwards again but the chant denied it any forward movement. The words then began to grab and twist the tendrils that the soul felt its way forwards with. The words began to twist tremendously around the soul, and in the grip of those swivelling lines the soul began to twist also, and then spin with increasing velocity. The soul cried out to be released but that merely wrenched it further into motion, as the spin imparted to it mounted incessantly. The soul was spun faster and faster, crushed by its dire pirouette into a smaller and smaller corner of the world.

And for its sins was the soul of Megiddo confined, in a prison of a terrible singularity. It continued to spin there, faster and more sickened and horrified, packed smaller and smaller into that one tiny corner of space and time where there could be no quantification. The spin was then released and made absolute and the desolation of this soul was assured. It was cut off from any forgiveness, for it had no claim to mercy, merely the destiny to be forever damned to its tiny prison where it would continue to spin, spin.

CHAPTER 6

Jesse James

Jesse Quinn had a hard birth but was a smiling baby, at least at the beginning of his life. He brought into the world some talents and some weaknesses but there was nothing very special about the way he saw the world, save for his constant feeling that he stood slightly to the outside of things, and that try as he might he could never reach the central place where the major parts of life were conducted.

As a child he was baptised Jesse, with James as his middle name, and thus was his father before him named. But it was a short lineage, of such redolent names, and Jesse's grandfather had not been so named, nor the many men that had gone before him. These earlier men were not marked out either to cause suffering or to save, but there was such a mark upon this child Jesse, bluntly obvious to those who were properly informed. Amongst these there spread a ripple of excitement when he was born into the world, a hope of a major victory on both sides of the ethical equation.

Whatever the destiny of this child there was a terrible bitterness that had guided his mother Naomi in the choice of his name. Jesse's father JJ had been a dashing man, and in his brighter

moments could focus intense love on the people he chose to favour. But he fell mostly in love with himself, as his life grew longer, especially with his own image reflected in the soft eyes of the women he caused to desire him, and the fickle men who both admired and envied him for the spell he could cast on women.

This weakness was an inheritance, rather than JJ's birthright, and as weak men have done throughout the ages he always pleaded this fact in his defence. This false and venal man had been brutalised by his mother, who was not ashamed at her brutality for he was, so she would say: a bad child, a bad seed. And although JJ was not in his turn brutal he was weak and unreliable and loved only those people he could control. Increasingly his main satisfaction was in neglecting and denying his wife Naomi, and elsewhere bleeding and manipulating other people, multiplying his own iniquity and sending it out into the world.

Jesse's mother Naomi might these days be described as a complex woman. Along with everything else that had assaulted her, every other insult she had to bear, there was awful difficulty in giving birth to Jesse and she was not able to have any more children after him. All of these things merged and submerged in creating bitterness in her heart, which then coursed out on to the head of her only son, trading hardship for that particular tenderness that he needed his mother to give him.

Was this the fault of Naomi? It is pointless to ask. Did her name expose her to the triumph of bitterness? It is pointless to speculate. Naomi was what she became, a sad and distorted woman, and she found devastating ways to press those

distortions home. She focussed her scorn and resentment on her son Jesse, and was thus able to present a preternaturally sunny disposition to other people. Your mother is a wonderful woman, people would say. You are lucky to have her. As this deception worked Jesse's wounds ever deeper in him.

If Jesse ever queried this reality people were resolute and disparaging. Your mother loves you, they would say, some of them spitting those words at him. All mothers love their children. They would deny his reality and turn it back on him, saying that it was wickedness to suggest anything else. How dare you, they would say. Ungrateful child, to question the love of your mother.

With parents like these there was no hope for this boy Jesse James. He was raised on a diet of bitterness and self-abnegation, and like his mother, like his father in his turn, Jesse turned his bitterness and his rage upon others. Continuing as he did so the great chain of evil suffered and evil inflicted, reaching back endlessly through the vast circle of time.

Jesse became cruel. He hurt animals and smaller children and he would kill things for the satisfaction of it, and in his cruelty and his rage he was transformed into the precisely the child that his mother needed him to be. The man that her bitterness had demanded from her flesh, the man who would prove to her those lies that were stored in her heart.

See what he does to me.
Even the son of my own body.
See what he is.
This is the Truth.
This is not my fault.

But the story changes, here.

Before Jesse was a man, without any shadow of a beard on his face, he began to experience snatches of horror and heart-sickness at the terror he was dealing into the world.

When these fits took him Jesse tried to crush them down. But the accusations within him would not relent, even when he turned his face away. At such a young age his conscience rose and overwhelmed him, witnessing the dire nature of his actions and their ugly fruit.

Jesse was dismayed by these things and the more he reflected the more he felt ashamed. He thought of his small cousin Laura, hardly old enough to walk, and how he had left her behind in an empty street because she could not keep up with him. He saw the tears on her dark lashes as he recalled his harsh words and his taunts and he was assailed by tremendous shame and grief. Even though his heart offered him further ways to avoid these feelings he let his feelings come, and they seared into his mind and heart. He saw his other cruelty, saw his mother's little dog shy away from him whenever he approached. Jesse knew the reason for that, the beatings and abuse he had dispensed, and suddenly tears came into his eyes, burning, stinging tears of self-reproach. They burned and he saw through them into the ugliness of his actions: the suffering they had created, the suffering they had maintained.

You should know: this is uncommon decency. For a boy so young, still nothing like a man, to turn away from his own iniquity, to be pricked by the stern reproach of his conscience without shifting the blame, without implicating even his

mother in the disease that had grown within him.

Just as Jesse was overpowered by his shame and his remorse, so too did he repent sincerely from his actions. Jesse changed his ways, and he swore especially to atone for his misdeeds, and in that instant of repentance all of his rage and cruelty was overpowered. As his heart turned towards the Light it turned the bitterness of Naomi out into the dust, to flail there and be still, with no further place to breed in him, and no purchase either within him or within the victims that he might have grafted it to.

Cynics might observe that Jesse had no claim to such repentance, or any example to follow in the restoration of his own damaged heart. He had been badly betrayed by the people who should have loved him, and there was no obvious influence in his life that could have set his footing so firmly back on the proper path.

But the world is vast, as are the places outside of it, and in the desert places where the strange voices sing perhaps there was some intercession on his behalf. A deep and abiding love that sang strangely to Jesse, from the clear space of these outward places, especially when he would doze, or dream, or come to the verge of sleep.

Sometimes in the dusk, in the night season, this love might float down upon his head, or rise like mist from the ground luminosity that arose unseen, unnoticed about him at these times. In the morning with the dew on the grass, and before the first light of the sun, a sure love that sang to him, that did not falter from its singing.

And if he could discern the words, in those times when he was anointed by them, reading the patterns in the dew and the evening sky, the mist upon the night gardens, Jesse may have heard these words, praising him and calling him to the greatness he was destined for:

Who is this, whose eyes are the Morning Sun
His face as irresistible as the dawn?
Who is it that comes among us
Like the balsam that flows upon the slopes of Gilead?

This strange love song that falls mostly on deaf ears and hearts of stone but which also falls on more fertile fields, like the heart of this Jesse James, hearts that are constructed to be entirely susceptible to it:

He is chief amongst the ten thousand…

And it may have been this love that Jesse learned by, this love that he followed, this song that led him to the places where men are guided so that they may be restored.

And it may be that Jesse multiplied this love within himself, and thus purified his heart, and grew worthier of this love as it reached out ever more strongly to him. Even though the architects of this song could not help but sing to him, as the

world has been made.

And if Jesse grew in his many gifts, gifts that might repay sevenfold the strange ones who sang to him, and if he thus accepted the destiny he was born to?

O you who know the truth -

CHAPTER 7

Better Than Birthdays

FOR those years that were designated to them Mother Ruby and Ruby Pearl roamed together and hunted together. Together they faced many dangers, and they destroyed many other dangers separately and alone. They shared and stored up their knowledge of these things without resorting to words, in the shared space that grew between them, unlimited even by the arcane forms of description that could approximate the nature of their deeds.

Ruby Child proved herself to be a savage hunter and to have an instinct for rout and capture that was developed far beyond the instincts of her mother. More and more Ruby led her mother in their forays, and she was so absorbed in their exact execution that she did not notice that her mother was lagging further behind, showing less and less fervour for the hunt. In her dedication Ruby did not see the space between them taken up increasingly by her young soul, as her mother's soul spooled down and was diminished. Ruby did not notice, when they sang together after hunting, she did not notice her mother sing ever more quietly, retaining more of the evil she had encountered, her strength slowly attenuating and laying her lower and lower.

One day Ruby arrived home from college to be greeted as usual by her mother waiting at the door of their little house. But on this day Ruby saw very deeply into her mother's soul and she saw the blunt truth of what was occurring there, what had been occurring for months without Ruby ever noticing.

Ruby gasped and pushed roughly past her mother and went directly to her room. She blocked her ears but she could not shut out the sound of her mother singing to her, this time her line more tenuous, full of longing and sadness and also a grave contrition.

Despite her shock and pain Ruby Child came out of her room, following her mother's songline down to where her she sat waiting for her, pouring her a cup of tea.

Why didn't you tell me?
Her mother smiled and stroked Ruby's burning cheeks.
It is forbidden, she said.
So that you would not seek to hold me.

How long do we have?
Some time, her mother said.
And my precious Ruby you already know. There is no death for us.
That is just a song, Ruby said.
No, her mother said. It is our song.
But is it true?
Yes, my child. I am with you. I will always be.

Ruby wanted to say more, or yell and run out of the house, but she saw how great was the weariness that had descended upon

her mother. Ruby led her by the hand to her bedroom and made her lie down, and although her mother told her not to fuss Ruby went to make her a fresh cup of tea, and a little bit of buttered toast.

When she returned to the bedroom her mother was already fast asleep. Ruby set her offerings down on the bedside table, and she sat there silently beside her unwaking mother until night came down around them.

Mother Ruby's sleep did not refresh her, and from that point onwards she rarely left her bed. Ruby tried to feed her but she took very little by way of food or drink, and she grew pale and her breath became shallow and strained whether she woke or slept.

Ruby knew that her mother was dying and she wanted to bring her medicine, but she also knew in the deep part of her bones that the death approaching her mother was not something that could be halted, even by the best medicine that was available.

Mother Ruby breathed shallower and shallower until there was little air that circulated in her lungs. She moved less and spoke less, and then upon the first new moon after she had taken to her bed, in that time between the darkness and the dawn, she stopped breathing altogether and her heart was still.

Ruby made careful funeral arrangements. She directed that her mother's body was to be burned, and she accompanied the body to every place that she was admitted, and she waited just outside the doors if that was all she was allowed. She directed that her mother should not be treated with any kind of chemical, and that nobody was to disturb her organs or her blood in any manner at all. Her mother was placed in a pine box without any adornment and she was brought as quickly as possible to the crematorium, where she was to be burned absolutely in accordance with Ruby's wishes. For as she grieved Ruby knew what forces were arrayed during that intervening time, forces anxious to take the body of her mother and to desecrate it, to use it for their own despicable ends.

On the final morning of these preparations Ruby sat in the crematorium, tense and serious and vigilant. Her mother's coffin was placed on to the conveyor and soon the flames of the furnace began to consume her body.

Ruby had been vigilant but as the fire did its work she knew there was no further need of that. She softened and found tears welling in her eyes, but she knew that these were forbidden to her even in such extremity. She closed off her tears and she sat without crying, shaking and shuddering in her desperate, dry-eyed grief.

As she sat and shook Ruby felt the flames devour her mother's body, and for the first time in her life she felt horribly, disastrously alone. Even by the standards of this depraved world she made a piteous sight, this slight girl shaking and heaving against the vastness of the world, having so carefully delivered her mother to the flames that were taking her away.

Ruby sat while the last parts of her mother were consumed and turned to ash. But just as she felt that happen, the last of her mother's body disintegrate, she felt the latches of her heart snap open. And what flowed into her, what her heart rejoiced to absorb? These are things that cannot be told, but Ruby's sadness was turned into joy, and just as she had sown in sorrow, so did she rejoice as she gathered in her sheaves. Her spirit soared in a fierce rush and joined ultimately with the soul of her mother, and also with the soul of every Ruby Tuesday that had gone before them. She found that what her mother had always sung to her was true, and that song was suddenly within her being sung by many singers, singing her back to the Garden where once they had sung, to which they will be restored by the One who will be sent to deliver them.

After some time the stiff man who was assisting Ruby with the funeral arrangements came up and sat next to her, carrying a small steel urn that he held out for her to take. Ruby thanked him with a smiling, overspilling warmth, and the man was both pleased and intensely puzzled by the change that had come upon this poor girl who had so recently lost her mother.

These are her ashes, he said.
Thank you, said Ruby.
I'm so sorry.

Don't be, she said, warmly shaking his hand.

The man did not know what else to say. He gravely wished her all the best, and she thanked him again, and although she took the urn with due gravity she only did so in order to protect the man from the limits of his understanding, the narrow constraints of his particular religious faith.

Ruby walked out of the crematorium into the cool air. She smelled the coming rain, the cool rain that was to fall on that day, the mercy that falls from heaven.

As she walked down the raked gravel of the driveway she opened the urn, and she let the ashes slowly swirl out of the vessel as she walked. The ashes dusted themselves against the neat hedges, and out on to the edges of the carefully tended path.

After all of the ashes were swept out Ruby dropped the urn into the last of the hedges lining the driveway to the crematorium. And through fine and persistent rain she walked bareheaded all the way back to her home. The rain moved in creases and rivulets through her hair and across her face, touching the sides of her mouth as they coursed there, her smile softly meeting the tiny streams as they flowed across her skin.

Ruby walked for many hours. When she arrived home she sat down at the kitchen table and smiled to think of her new presence there, now fully inhabiting their home. She thought of what she had become, what she was turning into. Ruby felt her mother now absolutely with her, and also the absolute presence of her lineage for the first time in her life, reaching back to those times when there was little else upon the earth. She felt her

mother's admiration for how she had confronted her grief, she heard her mother whisper to her and teach her those things that remained to be taught. And in that intense presence, the whole of her mother's soul, Ruby was most willingly instructed.

BOOK II
(2 Lupa)

CHAPTER 8

Jesse James, Law Man

ALTHOUGH religion was not the obvious cause of his suffering, the deprivation of Jesse James was multiplied by the fact that he was brought up within the confines of the Catholic Church.

Jesse went to mass and he saw the grim warnings. He was assailed by piteous images of Christ Crucified, this Sorrowing God who was also a young man, living alone and suffering alone. Jesse saw that for His bravery in particular Jesus was scourged and broken and killed, all at the will of His distant Father, who would neither intervene on His behalf, nor stoop to ameliorate His agony, deaf to His terrible, agonised pleas. *Eli, Eli. Why have you abandoned me?* To save the world it was said, but Jesse could see like anyone else that despite His horrifying suffering the world had not been saved.

Despite all of his misgivings Jesse thought he might be called to the priesthood, when he had finished his schooling. He liked the idea of listening to people and providing succour both practical and spiritual, and he thought that he might best be able to help people if he were freed from the burden of earning money.

Jesse's parish priest was a sharp-minded monsignor who still harboured some kindness in his heart, along with a hard kind of wisdom. He saw Jesse's genuine devotion to the welfare of other people, this devotion so rarely encountered, and he invited Jesse to eat with him at the presbytery one night.

Jesse came to dinner and the meal was pleasant enough. It was not until after dinner, when the priest was relieved by a couple of glasses of scotch, that he really searched Jesse out. The priest quickly gave him the warning that he wished in his sombre moments that somebody had given to him, when there was still time left to him to live some other sort of life.

Don't be mistaken, the priest said. It is lonely life.
Jesse nodded, although he went to disagree.
But your parishioners…
Need me, from time to time.
And I am there for them.
But I wonder, often, why there is nobody there for me.
Jesse looked puzzled.
Isn't God there?

Ah my boy, the monsignor said. I wish I had more to tell you about that. I know God doesn't speak to me, not like He used to. Perhaps He is just a good listener. But that comforts me less and less as I get older.

Jesse asked a few more tentative questions that the old priest either rebuffed or avoided, and they sat mostly in silence, looking down at their hands. As the evening lengthened Jesse noticed the old man sink back further into his chair and his eyes begin to glitter strangely. Jesse knew that any further questions

he might ask would come only as a goad to the priest, and he had no desire to cause this crumbling old man any further suffering. Jesse also saw in a bright flash that although the presbytery was very clean it was also very sterile, right down to the ornaments on the mantelpiece. Jesse knew suddenly that this was not a House of God, at least not of any God that he could relate to.

Jesse stayed long enough to be polite and then he stood awkwardly and thanked the Monsignor for his hospitality. Jesse was sincere in his thanks but as he was walking down the front steps he felt a tremendous weight shrug and lift off him. He felt the evening coolness greet him and revive him, as the dew drifted down softly through the night air, and as those strange refrains called to him again from just beyond his hearing Jesse almost turned and marched back to the presbytery, to grab the old man by the hand and bring him out into the night air, to be blessed by it, perhaps to be set free.

But Jesse did not turn back. He had seen the tremor in the Monsignor's hands, the whiskey he poured to relieve it, and he knew that there would be no redemption for such a man even in the deep consolation of that night, for he had made his election and stood condemned by it and was now lost to healing of any kind.

Instead Jesse walked home through the cool evening, grateful and unencumbered, still without a clear path but also preserved from one particularly nasty fate. He walked slowly and let the night breezes instruct his heart, and hint to him in words he did not recognise what he might do with his life: what he might achieve, how he might be blessed, how he might really live.

When Jesse finished school he looked around hoping to find himself a career. Something that would suit a hard-working young man who was strong and diligent but not especially brilliant at anything. Jesse spoke to a couple of adults that he trusted, and he looked into himself for inspiration, and in the end he chose to enter the police.

As a police officer Jesse had hoped to serve and protect, to be a bastion for those who most needed protection, but Jesse was naive to hope for these things. What he found instead was a brutal culture seeded heavily with corruption. On more than one occasion he was handed a plain yellow envelope and he knew without opening it what it contained. Each time he would hand the windfall back, shaking his head, and when he had done this three times he was marked out for it and nobody was ever the same way towards him again. Even other police who would not take the envelopes did not acknowledge him or help him any further.

The one time he tried to speak to his sergeant about it the man made a zipping motion across his lips and mimed shooting himself in the head. Jesse got up quickly and saluted and said yessir and got out of there as fast as he could, his guts churning and his mind trying to overcome his fear, wondering whether he had already gone too far to escape the sanction that his superior officer had so clearly signalled to him.

Jesse was accustomed to being on the outside of things, and he might have persisted with his chosen career had there been some good that he could do. Instead he found himself booking

drunks and itinerants and junkies, people who needed help rather than punishment, and he restrained and sometimes injured earnest students and immigrants and plain ordinary mothers and fathers who were protesting some just cause or other. He took a secondment to the sexual offences unit and he sat for those weeks looking at disgusting images of children, issuing warrants for the arrest of the men who collected these images, for some reason or satisfaction entirely unfathomable to Jesse.

There were real children in these images but the investigators never found the monsters who were degrading them in such ways. They only ever busted the pathetic men who were addicted to looking at these pictures, men who had almost without exception been the victims of terrible abuse themselves. Jesse knew that they had been brutalised and twisted by far worse crimes than they had committed but he also knew there was no point in speaking such truths, as he would be taken as justifying or perhaps identifying with these degenerates, and so he reluctantly and silently kept doing his job, amassing the evidence he needed to put these wretches into jail.

Jesse admired women, from his strange distance, and he experienced longing for certain of them that he could not put into words. Now and then he even got up the courage to ask a girl out. He would smile and approach her with the same

longing that had called to him as a child, that called to him even now, the only love that Jesse had ever known.

For some reason this love only repulsed the women he approached. They batted it away and sneered at him and said: stop with this needy shit already. He tried a couple of times to explain that he could take care of himself, and of them also if they would like that, but this reaction in these women was not susceptible to that sort of rationality, and his protestations only served to confirm their accusations against him. You are so fucking lame.

There were clever girls who immediately recognised the damage that Naomi had put in him but it was with a cruel instinct. They mocked him in subtle ways and he never had any defence to that kind of derision. They mocked the victim as though it were his crime, his shortfall, and Jesse in his longing could not protect himself against this knowing sort of cruelty.

Jesse would treat women kindly and they would tire of that especially, in their damaged hearts that yearned only for abuse. They would leave him stranded while they went off with callous boys who preened and grinned with their teeth, who flattered expertly but had no real love in them. Boys who would complete the circuit of contempt by seducing these women and using them, then turning on them with scorn or cruelty if they were ever requested to make good on their blandishments, their extravagant promises of Love.

After a while Jesse stopped trying. He forgot any thought of love and went on through life resigned, and lonely, and as he grew out of his childhood the strange mercy that had always anointed him grew more and more remote. Jesse walked alone

without any consolation and he began to doubt whether there was any love left in the world. This conviction that nobody will allow, this desolate truth that has been cried out in Psalms and other supplications since the beginning of history. Jesse came to expect very little of women, and although he nursed his life along he almost entirely forgot that there was something, somewhere in the deep heart of the world, something that loved him and wanted him to be happy.

One day Jesse was appearing for the prosecution at the magistrate's court. He made his usual fair submissions, moderated by an understanding of the sad and often brutal backgrounds of those he was prosecuting.

One defendant especially moved him, a woman who had been charged for possession of a small amount of methamphetamine and for other petty offences. She had something of his mother about her, as she trembled and scratched her arms. Like Naomi she sought to blame everybody else for her predicament but there was truth in that as well, such that any compassionate soul would be moved to pity for this poor creature, hunched there at the bar table weeping and shuddering and holding out her hands.

The duty lawyer who was defending that day knew something of Jesse, and he was moved by the obvious compassion that

Jesse extended to this poor woman. After the morning's list was completed he came over and touched Jesse's arm and said: Senior Constable. Would you have time for a coffee? Jesse smiled and said: I don't, I really don't, but I think I can make an exception.

Over bad coffee and a couple of shortbread biscuits the lawyer told Jesse various things. He spoke about Legal Aid funding being pruned back, about the increasing difficulty in getting people access to justice. He asked Jesse various things with a keen and rare interest, such as how he came to be a cop.

I wanted to make a difference, Jesse said.
And are you?
Jesse smiled.
Probably not, but I'm trying to do no harm.

The lawyer told him that there were not many jobs that made a difference but that keeping busted-ass people out of jail was difference enough for him. Jesse said that he was not lawyer material but his new friend waved that away. It's not rocket science, he said. There are the elements of the offence, and there is the evidence. You do it all already. All you really need is the desire to keep these people on the right side of the fence. And the courage to stand up and fight for them, even when they won't fight for themselves.

As Jesse listened his heart surged quietly. He knew that this conversation was destined to bring about a change, that it was one of those opportunities life is able to present to people if they have the courage and the grace to accept. The lawyer offered to have a word to the Dean of one of the law schools in the city, a friend of his. Jesse thanked him for that but he was

also slightly puzzled. Why would you do this for me? he asked. The lawyer shrugged and said: some people are obscure, Senior Constable, but you're not one of them. You are clearly one of the good guys.

In due course the Dean was approached and Jesse was offered a place in an accelerated degree programme with a half-scholarship. Jesse took the place, and he remained poor for a long time, but with work at a security firm and extreme frugality he was able to pay his way. As it had been at school Jesse was not particularly brilliant but he was never too far behind, and he had the advantage of his police work to take him over various obstacles. Jesse eventually graduated with a mid-range honours degree with a reasonable specialty in criminal law and procedure.

Jesse thought about joining a firm or Legal Aid but after a couple of interviews he decided that he knew enough to strike out on his own. He rented a tiny office on the shabby fringe of the city and he put out his shingle and on it was written simply:

Jesse J. Quinn
(Formerly Senior Constable)
Attorney at Law

Jesse worried about paying his rent or having to pull beers at a bar to cover himself but as soon as he opened his doors there was a steady stream of clients. People who thought that he might be able to talk to the police for them, to get them some advantage, but while Jesse held some sway most of his former colleagues envied him, with some turning that into open hostility.

Jesse was not concerned. He knew that the most important person to persuade was the judge or magistrate hearing the case, and as he concentrated on that aspect of persuasion he soon became very deft. He could be tough when that was required, and also very subtle, and he had great success even in the most difficult cases. He would get his clients put on diversion orders and community service, obtaining orders for the treatment of their addictions and their mental illnesses. Although some of his clients actually preferred a stint in prison there were many who moved through these services back to health and decent lives. Such results gratified Jesse very greatly, and spurred him to work ever harder.

Jesse was not especially good looking but he was tall and broad and he carried himself gravely and with grave sincerity. The truth also infused him, as he spoke and listened with serious direction and intent. He would take his clients out for coffee and a sandwich and speak to them from his heart, and many clients came to believe that there was some value in their lives merely by hearing Jesse assert this truth to them. He also outlined their choices: their own past of depravity and suffering sprawling hopelessly into the future, or the path of honour and their own conviction. And though there were many clients who heard Jesse and did not listen, there were many who were moved by his words and went on to prove his faith in them.

Jesse worked hard and he won hard cases and his wins brought him a great deal more work. Some clients were referred by caseworkers and parole officers and family but increasingly people heard of Jesse directly and they came to him for help. He became very busy and then crazy-busy and things generally deteriorated until a colleague pulled him up one day, laughing at the mess of paper that Jesse was drowning in.

You need some help, he said.
Jesse smiled, looking around.
I think you might be right.
Here, said his colleague.
I wrote you an advert, to save your sorry ass.

The advert was put in the next day's papers, and it drew a surprising number of applicants. Jesse looked over the resumes that these people had submitted, their various qualifications and experience, but they all seemed to merge with one another and look very much the same. He thought interviews might help but the candidates were all similarly polished, and they each told him exactly the same things about why he would be lucky to hire them. Jesse was polite and he thanked each applicant for their interest, but with every interview he felt like he was getting further and further away from finding what he needed.

There was one applicant, though. She held herself quietly and with strange poise for such a young woman, and there was also a sad intensity in her that Jesse identified with. She answered all of his questions with tremendous sincerity even when the truth counted against her, and when Jesse asked her about the terrible mess he had made she smiled quietly and nodded, saying: yes, Mr Quinn. I think that I can fix it.

So Ruby Pearl Tuesday came to work for Jesse Quinn. The first week she did not seem to make much headway against the mess, but she smiled as Jesse looked around and apologised and she said: Mr Quinn. I promise you. You can leave it to me.

Jesse blushed and said: of course, Ruby.
I'm just sorry I'm such a mess.
She smiled at him, looking around.
You've got yourself in a bit of a state, haven't you.
Jesse nodded.
Never mind, Mr Quinn.
I think I can handle it.

Before the end of the next week the office was like a new pin. There were shelves of files and bold long file numbers, allocating every note and scrap of paper to its proper place.

Jesse was astonished by this transformation and he felt tremendous gratitude, and he rushed out to buy Ruby some flowers that same afternoon. In his haste Jesse forgot the profound significance of roses and he bought her twelve long stems, the flowers all a deep velvet red. He saw Ruby gasp as he held the bunch out towards her, and he blushed suddenly and profoundly until he was nearly the same colour as the flowers.

I'm sorry, he said.
I just didn't know what else...
Oh Mr Quinn, she said.
Roses are my favourite.
Especially in that colour.
Jesse smiled and nodded, his face growing less inflamed.

Now Jesse Quinn had a mind that became absorbed very easily in the one thing that was before it, which was one reason why his filing had come so badly undone.

It was also the main reason that he did not notice anything strange occurring after Ruby came to work for him, the strange change in the ebb and flow of clients arriving at his office, the way that clients departed as well. Certain clients would just drop off the radar without any explanation, and there were new clients who seemed to pop up from the most unlikely places. Clients who would walk in unannounced as if in a dream, and when Ruby announced them she might also say quietly: Mr Quinn. It could be a good idea to see this client immediately. Just for a minute, just to calm her down.

Jesse would always comply with those things that Ruby asked of him. He met with these clients and heard their stories, and more and more those stories were of violence and persecution. Sometimes that was at the hands of the police but usually there were far worse perpetrators than that. These clients would often weep as he dispensed his advice and reassurance, and tell him as he did so: I knew it. I knew they were right, to draw me to you. Although Jesse would agree he had no real understanding of the import of these words. He would just nod in agreement and say: there are never any guarantees, but I promise you I'll give it my best shot.

Monday mornings Jesse would take Ruby down the street for brunch, and they would talk over anything that needed reviewing. Ruby spoke without referring to notes or lists, reminding Jesse of deadlines and court dates, showing him all of these things set out in the diary that she kept for him.

They would eat and then walk slowly back to the office. On hot days Ruby wore broad-brimmed colourful hats and chided Jesse about his Irish skin, the dangers of the sun as it burned him. On wet days Ruby went bare-headed, and although Jesse always thrust his umbrella out to shelter her she would twist away from him and say: oh no, Mr Quinn. It's so lovely, in the rain. Even as her hair grew heavy-wet, dripping in slashes across her jacket and the collar of her shirt.

Jesse was increasingly grateful for the help that Ruby gave him, and surer every day that he could not do without her. He gave her a pay rise for three quarters in succession, and at the last one she tutted and blushed and shook her head at him.

Mr Quinn. I think that is enough.
Jesse screwed up his face.
I don't know, he said.
I don't know how I can hope to repay you.

Ruby knew, though. She watched him give straight advice to the suffering and the poor, those who were drawn to seek him out. She secretly thrilled to see him stand up on their behalf, to have the courage to defend and protect these wretches who had never known protection in their lives. There were times when Jesse went down and these times never got any easier, but there were many more times when he had unfair charges dismissed and proposed penalties reduced by magistrates and judges who were moved by his sincerity, his appeals for them to be clement and humane in the treatment of his people.

Ruby loved to see these things meted out to the deserving but there were darker lines striating her gratitude, lines of enquiry

and access to various clients that Jesse could not perceive. He would represent every client without fear or favour but that dispassionate sort of justice was not the justice that Ruby and her sisters dispensed.

Ruby would see truths leap out at her the instant she welcomed clients into the office, although she was always careful to smile very blandly, keeping her teeth hidden. She would identify the wicked as they sat there rehearsing the lies that they would tell to Jesse, so smugly satisfied with the protections guaranteed to them by the elegance and idealism of our legal system. Ruby judged them swiftly and unerringly, and although she sat there meekly and smiled at them, in her innermost self there was a lust for satisfaction that she in her hunting instincts could sometimes only barely constrain.

Jesse was always respectful but could not help but warm hugely to Ruby. His honour bound him to be formal and reserved with her, but although he observed those strictures carefully Ruby quickly became everything that had been missing in his life.

Ruby in her turn warmed to Jesse immensely. Yet as her heart softened to him she knew what was required of her, and also what was strictly prohibited. Thus she maintained her careful cordiality with Jesse, despite those feelings that were building within her for this man who struggled so bravely in the

loneliness and the wastes of the world that he had been consigned to.

One day Jesse came to her and raised their strange formality.
Ruby. You know you don't need to call me Mr Quinn.
Jesse would be fine.
Ruby nodded and said: I know.

Despite what leapt in Ruby she looked downwards. She said that calling him Jesse might be a little too informal, at least for the time being. Jesse nodded quickly and said yes, yes of course. She saw him wax so remorseful, so crestfallen, that she could not help but reach out to him.

How about I meet you halfway, she said.
And call you Mr Jesse.
Jesse smiled broadly and said: isn't that worse?
Ruby smiled and said: not for me.
Do you mind me still calling you Ruby?
She smiled broadly at him.
Yes, Mr Jesse.
I believe that would be just fine.

At the end of every month there were Friday night drinks. Jesse hosted a ragged band of lawyers and court officers who drank and laughed and told the stories that had been mounting in them since the last time. There were women and men there but they were mostly men, and poor Ruby had to field all of their tipsy questions, and be friendly whilst deflecting their mild attempts to flirt with her. She would laugh and keep circulating and the men sighed and learned that they could not succeed with her, and they all admired her particularly for that, her faculty for deflecting their most subtle advances.

Some of the cannier men would watch Ruby manoeuvre around the room and see her return to Jesse again and again, often with a fresh drink or something to eat. These men would smile enviously as she was kind to him and as Jesse gratefully accepted her attention. On the sly they would accuse Jesse of more than this, in various bawdy ways, and he would shake his head and demur and say: she is far more my mother than my wife.

But in his heart Jesse knew that there was more than this. On those nights that Ruby was especially attentive he would glance over at her and fill up with longing, and with some drink in him that longing would completely fill him up. He wondered at her age, and whether the perhaps ten years difference would repulse her. He thought more and then forced those thoughts down because they were misplaced, and because if he did not force them down these feelings might overflow and betray themselves for what they really were.

On those nights Ruby would come over and touch his arm softly and say: why are you looking at me funny? And he would say: I'm sorry Ruby. I'm just a little bit drunk. And she would tut him like she always did and say: no more for you, mister, and Jesse would always nod ruefully and say: no more.

Most days Ruby was bright and talkative and she would sing quietly as she busied herself around the office. There were days however that she seemed a bit under the weather, and some days when she would call early and tell Jesse that she would not be able to come in. Jesse was always solicitous in these times, asking whether she needed anything but she would always say: a day's rest is all. And the next day she would be

well again and extra bubbly, and Jesse did not enquire further because he knew there were some things that men would be better not to enquire about. In any event the barrage of papers across his desk once Ruby returned would keep him from making any enquiries whether ill-advised or not.

Jesse's practice flourished. He took high profile cases and won many of them, and his office groaned under the weight of the cards and small mementos that grateful clients would bring to him. He worried about the extra work and its effect on Ruby but she seemed to get brighter and happier as the surge of clients increased. Jesse knew that he owed most of this new success to Ruby, who kept getting more and more efficient, and at the end of one particularly busy day he asked Ruby to sit down with him and talk.

Now Ruby, he said. I am not permitted to make you a partner, not in the actual firm. Is there anything else that will suffice to repay you for all of this? Ruby said: only to keep me on here, and pay me as well as you pay me. As Jesse nodded gravely Ruby suddenly smiled and she said: oh. Well as long as you are asking. A present some day might be nice. Jesse said he was not much good at presents, and Ruby said: perhaps just some more flowers, until you find more inspiration.

Jesse was glad to have that clarity. He started bringing Ruby cut flowers every week. She would smile warmly when he brought them to her and she would say with genuine sincerity: what a lovely present. He was not sure what other gift might please Ruby but when he tried to quiz her she always said: Mr Jesse. These flowers are lovely. You really don't need to buy me anything else.

Jesse bought Ruby a book one time, one of his favourite books. He wrote something on the flyleaf, starting hesitant but becoming increasingly bold as he wrote. He was in the end quite forward and he repeated himself and he soon grew ashamed of what he had written. He sat down again and drafted something different on his laptop, where he would have the time and liberty to shift it around, and he swiped at it a few times and cut it back and still the perfection of it eluded him. He took two days to finish it, even fretting over the salutation, and in the end he got weary of perfection and he printed it out and thought it would have to do.

What he pasted into the book read as follows:

My Dear Ruby,

I thought you might like this book. I liked it very much as a young man, and I have yet to find its equal anywhere in the world.

My only concern is that the book might appeal mostly to me and to other romantic men, what is in our hearts and minds.

If that is true then I hope you will forgive me, for as the hero says: as men we cannot do any better than to love, and to give our love courageously without stopping to count the cost.

I hope that is enough for now.

Love,

Jesse.

Jesse left the book on Ruby's desk one evening after she had headed home. He grew concerned about it overnight, worrying that he had gone too far, and he went into work very early the next day to retrieve the book and figure out what he could better write to Ruby.

When he arrived Jesse found Ruby already at her desk, smiling at him. He went to apologise for what he had written but before he could speak she held the book up and said: I liked what you wrote for me.

I'm glad, he said.
And what was beneath was even better.
Jesse halted, and blushed.
But it was…
Hidden. I know. Isn't that always the way?
He coloured further and thrust a bunch of gerberas at her.
I was going to trade these for it.
Oh they are lovely, she said.
But I would not trade, not for all the flowers in the world.

Jesse handed the flowers to Ruby, and when she was up getting a vase to contain them he opened the little book he had given to her. The paper he had glued there was still stuck fast and to his eyes there was not even a shadow to betray what was underneath. As he grasped the edges of the paper, thinking perhaps he might tear the page away, Jesse glanced over to where Ruby stood with her back to him and without turning around she said: I see you, Jesse Quinn. Don't you even think about it.

Jesse laughed and closed the book, placing it back on her desk before he turned and walked into his office. Even with her back

turned to him Ruby knew every step that he took, and she saw him even after he had entered his office and closed his door. Where he sank at his desk and held his head and smiled a rueful smile, for this woman that he now saw that he loved, hopelessly and completely. And yet how could he ask that of her? And what might he offer?

One night after drinks Jesse asked Ruby to dine with him, and although it was a transgression for her to accept his offer, in these exact circumstances, she was loose from two glasses of a very good champagne and she said: Lovely. They got their coats and went to an expensive place and she made some awkward noises but Jesse smiled and said: Ruby. It would be such a small price, to have you dine with me.

They ate small courses of exquisite food, and though there were only small glasses of wine selected to accompany each course they were soon both very effusive. Ruby told Jesse stories about her mother, and when she told him of the song named after her Jesse said, astonished: I thought it must have been the other way around. He listened intently as she told him so much more than he had known, and he asked her about her own life outside of work and she shook her head and said: I'm afraid that is not very interesting to talk about.

Jesse spoke softly in the candlelight, telling Ruby things that he

had never told anyone. He spoke of his bitter mother and his absent father, all the while doing his best to excuse them, and he told Ruby many other things about his efforts to overcome his childhood. How for a long time he would take no drink at all. It made me a boring kid, he said. When I left school I left without many friends, and it did not get much better when I was with the police.

And even now, he said. These guys I have to our drinks? If I gave up again, if I didn't buy them booze, they would forget about me quicker than you can say my name.

Mr Jesse, said Ruby with a smile.
Quicker than that, he said.

Their talk turned to intimate things and he confessed his loneliness to her and she nodded gravely as he told her and said: I can see that. It's even in the way that you hold yourself. He asked her whether there was anyone in her life and she said: not that I mean to tell you about. He stopped, and he coughed and apologised, and Ruby leaned in quickly and said: that was a stupid thing to say. There's no one to tell you about. I just wanted to sound less lame when I told you that.

Jesse confessed his loves, brief as they had been, and he told Ruby of the heartache that he had been caused by women who would initially express interest in him, become increasingly scornful of his tender heart, and then leave. I feel like an old man, he said. I want someone to cook for and watch TV with. They all want to be trophy wives. And when they see that I am poor, or too poor for them, they just leave me without stopping to say goodbye. Maybe a text, I don't know. Even a fuck you would have been nice.

Such conversations are perilous things, especially when they are inflamed by the drinking of fine and sensual wines. Ruby and Jesse began talking about what they wanted, in love especially, and what they would settle for, and there were covert declarations within these confessions, and there was secret yearning expressed without any explicit confession of anything, and more than that even, in the longing that was between them.

Ruby, he said.
Yes.
I have something to ask you.
She lowered her head.
Mr Jesse.
Yes Ruby?
It might be better if you didn't.
Jesse sighed and looked downwards, shifting his cutlery with his fingertips.
I suppose I already knew that, he said.

Ruby saw such sadness rise in him, and his hard solitude, and his yearning to be released from it. She also saw his tragic goodness shining out to her more brightly than she had ever seen it. Ruby began to soften and she felt her heart reach out to him but there were gargoyles at the gates of her heart and they arrested it as it flowed. They turned her love back sharply and she saw deeply into things that she had not properly comprehended before, and with the mercy and the severity of every Ruby Tuesday, the great heart that had beaten since Gan Eden, she took Jesse's mind and she shepherded it beside quiet waters, and in those cool pastures where he was led Ruby spoke to him, using just those words that were stored within

her, for Jesse and for this very occasion.

O Jesse. You fine, upright man. My heart yearns for you, as you can only imagine. But in Babylon you know: my love would mark you out for destruction, and damn me to die of desolation. O spring of Jesse, O my heart's desire. I shall not yield to you. You shall not know me, Beloved, until we are led back into the Promised Land.

Ruby was silent again and Jesse was quiet and still, and he did not move for many seconds. When he did move he slowly picked up his wine glass, and examining it in the soft light of the room he asked: what are they putting in my wine? And Ruby held her glass up too and she laughed gently at his astonishment and said: whatever it is, I hope you feel better. And he said: I feel proud, for some reason. I feel like somebody loves me. And Ruby said: we all love you, Mister Jesse. More than you can know.

And although Ruby was quiet about that and did not volunteer anything further still Jesse's heart swelled gently within him. It grew and also softened in pride and satisfaction, and although these feelings were strange still he felt as though he was worthy of them, and they did not abate for the whole of the rest of the meal, or the next day, or the next. Like a gift, an abundant blessing, these feelings stayed within Jesse and they shored him up, and while his solitude persisted he felt justified in it, and even loved, and he felt all of the strictness of his honour but also the sturdy reassurance of it, as it beat with the same beat of his heart, entirely inseparable from that deep rhythm which sustained him, and which raised him up. Such is more than most men could hope for.

CHAPTER 9

The Hunt Goes On

UNDER the full moon, Ruby always hunted.

She hunted mostly alone but sometimes in conjunction with her fellow hunters, bound by their intertwined hearts to aid each other, and by the power of the moon.

Ruby read the legends of the world as they spanned the light and the dark places, searching both ways throughout history to seek out the legends of the damned. Knowing the truths that were recorded there, still she sought out more prosaic knowledge of the deeds of the wicked, even in the documents she now had access to, the files she kept so neatly for Jesse.

Ruby followed some trails for many months, carefully threading out the fibres of good and evil. She also struck swiftly, unerringly, where those stories were finished and told. Ruby used all of the powers of her lineage and also the new powers that she had brought into the world, and while she did not exult in her work she was absolutely committed to it. For it was what she was, in heart and soul, and there was no sense in asking whether she might relent from it, or leave the work to others even if those capable could be found.

For the wicked there was no mercy. Ruby tore their hearts out of their chests and presented them for judgment, and upon their own pronouncement her victims stood condemned. She ripped minds out of heads and interrogated them, she read the very guts and entrails of those who gorged themselves on cruelty, drawing them out for the divination of the truths that resided there.

For the wicked there can be no mercy. Sooner or later judgment will be executed upon them, swift and terrible and leaving no time for appeal or remorse.

To those who would harm the innocent: rightly should you fear. Those who would abuse children, in the dire secrecy of your crimes: rightly should you fear. Those who would lie and exploit and slander, consuming the goodwill of the world: rightly should you fear.

Especially under the full moon, when Ruby always hunted.

CHAPTER 10

The Watchmen Of The City

RUBY had her ways and she was faithful to them but like all beings fair and foul her perspective was limited. There were movements in the world that even her special sight could not perceive, subject as it was to the strict delineations that allow uncertainty to bleed into the world.

Carlos Lasenex was one very special surprise. He arrived at Jesse's office at 10am on a sunny Monday morning, smiling broadly at Ruby, asking with perfect deference whether he might be granted a moment to consult with Mr Quinn. Ruby told him that Jesse was in court, and Carlos said that he would happily wait. When Ruby said that Jesse might be some time Carlos smiled more broadly, saying: I am content to wait for as long as might be necessary.

As Carlos sat waiting on the battered chesterfield, elegant and upright, Ruby grew more and more uneasy about his presence. She tried to clear her mind towards a proper view of him, but there was nothing in his appearance or demeanour that she could interpret clearly. In her anxiety to know more Ruby sent a small stream of enquiry towards his heart, but just as it entered that place Ruby found it snapped and blunted back at her with

a single imperious word.

Don't.
Ruby was shocked, at this retort from this man.
My business is with him.
Do not intrude upon me again.

Ruby flushed a deep crimson as she looked around for something to distract her. As she flailed there at her desk Carlos looked over at her and smiled his inscrutable smile and said: Madam I wonder. Would you have the facilities to allow me to make a cup of tea? Ruby pointed mutely towards the kitchen alcove, suddenly unable to speak, and Carlos thanked her kindly and moved in that direction. As he made and then sipped his strong black tea he became stranger to Ruby, and despite her efforts to remain calm she found herself confused and beset by an unfamiliar feeling, a feeling that she realised with a sudden flash must be the feeling of fear.

Jesse returned to the office at around eleven, and before Ruby could introduce their strange guest he stood up and shook Jesse's hand. I am Carlos Lasenex, he said, in his cool, polite manner. I wonder if I may have a few moments of your time. Jesse nodded and said of course, Mr Lasenex. Just let me have ten minutes? Carlos bowed slightly and said: please, Mr Quinn. Take as much time as you need.

As Jesse walked past Ruby towards his office he raised his eyebrows to her in query, and she shrugged her shoulders in a most uncharacteristic way. He paused and asked quietly: Ruby. Are you OK? She nodded and turned blushing to some papers on her desk, and although Jesse was puzzled at this change in her he turned slowly and went through the door of his office.

Once inside Jesse's office Carlos Lasenex reclined in his chair and smiled.

This is a charming office you have, Mr Quinn.
By charming I take it you mean small?
Perhaps compact is a better word.
Indeed, said Jesse. So. How can I help?
Help? Carlos smiled broadly.
I thought I might instead help you.
Jesse looked surprised.
Why is that, Mr Lasenex?
Please. Call me Carlos.
Fine. Carlos.

Thank you, said Carlos. You would like me to explain? Well. There are certain people, Mr Quinn. Certain people who… matter. They may not know it but there are others who do know it, very clearly. And it is in the interests of such people, for me to how shall I say. To keep an eye on them.

Jesse sighed and shook his head. Mr Lasenex. I appreciate your interest in me, really I do, but there are people today who genuinely need me. So unless there is anything specific I can assist you with…

Of course, of course. I have some specific questions. I suppose the first would be: how do you choose your clients?

Do you mean…
Yes. The ones you defend. How do you come to choose them?
They choose me, Jesse said.
No.
Yes, Mr Lasenex. I can swear to it.

Carlos wrinkled his brow and said: I very much doubt that, Mr Quinn. There are many things in this world, and others exterior to it entirely, but free choice is very infrequently seen. No. I rather suspect that most of your clients are drawn here. I would suggest that many of them tell you this self-same thing.

Well yes, Jesse said, they do say that but I don't….
And what is it that draws them in?
Jesse sighed. Is this a test?
No.
I really have no idea.
Think, Mr Quinn.
Jesse sighed.
Perhaps you could enlighten me?

Carlos looked back over his shoulder towards the door.
Do you know what that woman is?
Ruby?
So she says.

Jesse bristled at that and said: her name is Ruby. Ruby Tuesday, if you can believe that. And she runs my practice, every part of it. I could not do without her.

And your clients?
I keep them out of jail.
But afterwards? How do they fare?

I really have no idea.
Carlos smiled.
No. I believe you. You really don't have any idea.

Carlos was silent and then he looked at his watch. Well perhaps I had better get out of your hair, he said. Thank you for your time. I will leave my details, so that you can call me if you notice anything… strange. I am possessed of a certain authority.

Possessed? asked Jesse.
Carlos smiled.
Perhaps that is also true.

Jesse ran his hand through his hair. I'm sorry Mr Lasenex that was rude of me. I do appreciate your interest, but unless you can tell me what you need, I don't see how I can assist you any further.

Of course, Mr Quinn.
Perhaps I will come back to you when I have something more specific to discuss.
No problem, Carlos. I wish I could be more help.
Oh you have helped me already. And you may get further opportunity.
I hope so.
Carlos got up and bowed slightly.
You may wish otherwise, he said.
Once you know what might be asked.
And he turned and left the office immediately.

As Carlos Lasenex passed Ruby's desk he paused for a moment, feeling her shrink back and her shields arise against him. She recoiled but her shields were porous to the forces that were within him and Carlos surged through them and past them on all sides at once, and in a less than a moment of conventional time he delivered the following stern message to Ruby.

There are Rules, he said, his voice crashing within her mind. There are Sanctions, also, attendant upon those rules. Do not go too far, She-Wolf. There are mandates within heaven and earth that vastly exceed your own mandate. If you go too much further you may find out about them, much to your sorrow and dismay.

Carlos surged further within Ruby's mind and she made no further effort to repulse him.

You do not know what this man is. You do not know what he might become. You are arrogant, and that serves you in your hunting but it will not serve you here. If you interfere you might find out what hell really means, and there may well be Hell to pay. And what repayments they exact in that place? You cannot begin to imagine.

Ruby went to demur but Carlos interrupted her.

I have spoken, She-Wolf.
Beware of this man.
He will crush you.

You have no defences, not to the likes of him.

And as easily as he had breached them Carlos Lasenex surged back behind Ruby's barriers, as he smiled politely at her. There was at last some genuine warmth in the smile that he gave her, and her fear abated somewhat.

Ruby stared and sought to ask him: what are you? But the question was pointless, as he would not be permitted to answer, and Ruby realised suddenly that there were many things that were forbidden for her to know, by edict of an authority that was beyond her power to comprehend.

Ruby was confronted by that knowledge as she watched Carlos collect his jacket, return his cup to the kitchen alcove, and then walk out of the office, bowing to her slightly as the door closed upon him.

CHAPTER 11

The Love Of Ruby Tuesday

ONE unremarkable Thursday evening Jesse walked out of the office, farewelling Ruby as he went. Don't stay back too late, he said. Ruby reminded Jesse that she was not in tomorrow with a doctor's appointment and he said: of course, I should have remembered. I hope it's nothing serious. She laughed and said Mr Jesse you may not want to know. He hung his head in play shame and said: you're probably right about that.

Most nights Jesse went straight home to his empty house but this night he was booked for dinner with an old friend from school. The restaurant was decent but although there was talk and sincere efforts towards intimacy between them, there remained a gulf between the two men that could not be bridged. Jesse battled on, dredging up anecdote and memory, and he really tried to listen to the workaday claims that his friend kept trotting out. How his wife was riding him, how his kids were brats, how he would love to write a novel one day if the world would give him the permission to do so.

Jesse acknowledged that false dream and everything else that his former friend had to say to him but he grew sadder as the evening grew long, seeing their lives now so estranged from

each other.

After dinner the two men ambled slowly down the street past restaurants and fashion boutiques and bars. Although in the cool night they spoke very little to one another still they felt the oppression of the dinner table fall away from them. The bright moonlit evening did not require any further words and in the absence of speech they were suddenly companions again as they walked together down the street.

The night was so pleasant that Jesse's friend did not see him slow and then stop completely in the street. Nor did he notice Jesse's absence until he was twenty paces or more away from his side. He looked back and called out but Jesse did not hear him, but rather continued staring out across the street towards a dark laneway on the other side.

What Jesse stared at cannot easily be described in words. It was his whole heart's desire, and it was his fate, and it was everything he had never dared hope to find upon the earth. He saw a woman that he loved but she was so much more than that, as she shone out to him in a focussed beam that was for him and him utterly and also for him alone. He wept tears of gratitude that did not wet his face, and he felt such longing and desire that could undo a man if he had the courage to really feel those things. He saw something worth living for and something worth the immediate surrender of his life, and this contradictory desire to live and also to die made his heart swell to the point that it was barely contained within his chest.

These feelings were not only his feelings. What stood across from him, and what he stared at? O this luminous being desired Jesse more than a man could dare to imagine. The moon shone

brightly through him as well and Ruby could finally see the immense size of the heart that beat within Jesse, the sheer colours and the radiance with which it shone. As his heart went out to her Ruby felt herself throb hugely with it, and she gasped with the sudden desire to weep human tears and also tears made of moonlight for the man who burned there and stared at her so intently. His bravery and his honour burned especially incandescent, leaving Ruby to feel such hopeless devotion that she could not look away.

All of these things happened in an instant, and they also occurred in a space that extended infinitely beyond time. When Jesse was shaken back to reality by his friend he did not know what day it was, or what the hour, and he stared at the moon with some surprise, and when he looked back to where his heart's desire had been standing he saw that Ruby was no longer there.

Jesse woke from his reverie as his old friend gently shook him. He nodded and smiled and said: sorry about that. I must have drunk too much.

But Jesse knew that this not the proper explanation. Even as he recovered himself he was intensely illuminated by Ruby, feeling himself burn for the love of this woman who had now been so revealed to him. He also burned in the knowledge that the same desire was within her: that just as he burned for Ruby, so would she in her desire and devotion continue to burn for him.

CHAPTER 12

Yet Even If These Forget

WHEN Ruby arrived at work on Monday she went very intently about her tasks, pulling together all of the papers that had accumulated on her desk during her absence the previous Friday.

Jesse rushed out of the office very soon after she arrived, heading to an urgent bail hearing that had just been listed. On his way out he paused to say to Ruby: I think we need to talk. She nodded as he looked at her and she said: I do hope that I am not in trouble. No, Jesse said. I think that might be me. He gave her a wry grin and hurried out of the door.

At lunchtime Jesse tried to talk with Ruby but she made busy with client calls and organising the monthly accounts, and he sighed and left her to it. At afternoon tea he brought Ruby her favourite coffee and she thanked him briskly before turning back to her work.

At five sharp Ruby poked her head into Jesse's office. He asked her to sit with him but she said that she really had to fly. She also asked: perhaps you might walk with me? Jesse did his best to stifle the rush of pleasure that caused him just as Ruby said: I

have to warn you, I walk really fast. Jesse smiled. Then I'll just have to keep up. He got his jacket and held the door and the two of them made their way down via the elevator and out into the street.

Ruby walked fast enough to make conversation difficult. As Jesse hurried to keep up she also reached out gently into his mind with those powers that were within her. She led Jesse to her usual tram stop, and as he got on to the tram with her he looked around in a sort of vague astonishment. What am I doing? he asked. Ruby smiled and said he was being quite presumptuous.

Although Jesse moved towards the door at each stop he found that he could not bring himself to get off the tram, even when the doors clattered open for him. Jesse missed stop after stop in this way, halting and confused, until Ruby took his arm gently and guided him to relax into the journey, watching the flow of passengers moving on and off through the doors, Jesse still shaking his head as he rode the tram further and further up the line.

Eventually Ruby pressed his arm firmly and spoke in a quiet voice. The both of us get off here. They walked to the footpath and then down a gentle hill, until Ruby turned them both down a pretty street flanked with terrace houses. They turned down a laneway and then through a gate, and Ruby led them both beneath her trellis of wild roses and through the door that led into her house.

In the lounge room Jesse sat down, puzzled.
I'm sorry, he said.
I shouldn't be here.

Ruby hushed him and offered him a cup of tea. When he asked what she was offering she said: something very interesting, I believe you might enjoy. Jesse sat very still on the sofa as she pottered in the kitchen, and after some time she came out with two bright green teacups, one for her and one for him.

Jesse thanked her and took his cup and when he asked her what it was she said: a sort of herbal tea. Try it and see. He drank and tasted liquorice and cinnamon and raw sugar, and although the tea was hot he drank very deeply of it. Ruby was quiet and drank her tea, waiting for the effects to come upon them both, waiting until she might press its forgetfulness down inside of Jesse, to erase any memory of the secrets she had been careless enough to reveal to him by the light of that last full moon.

The potion Ruby gave Jesse was a potent memory scrub. As it trickled into his veins and muscles it washed these places first, and then it headed towards his heart to work its potent magic. But this was no common man that the potion had invaded, and there was a heart within Jesse that was chambered like no ordinary heart. The potion sank there and it foundered badly, and it produced strange and unforeseen results. Jesse felt the potion bite and then retreat and he felt something suddenly surge within him, something like tenderness but with much more passion and intent. This surge built within him, gathering in his high and his low places, before reaching out in a prodigious sensual flood towards poor Ruby Tuesday.

Ruby saw this great tide flow towards her but although she was shocked she did not feel dismayed. There was a deep gentleness in what flowed, and it reached out to her with such tenderness and strength that she was instantly opened to it. There was

nothing in her that could hold it back, even if she had retained any shred of a desire to do so.

Ruby, Jesse said.
She gasped at the sound of her name.
Ruby what was in this tea?

She grew faint and began to pitch forwards but Jesse was before her in an instant. He held Ruby there, gentle and intense, and she did not fall any further. She lurched forwards involuntarily to kiss Jesse but he held her gently upright and away from him and her lips closed on the grave disappointment of space.

I'm not mad with you, he said.
Jesse don't make me.
Please, Ruby. It's Ok.
No No No.
Please, Ruby. I don't understand....
Jesse...
Please.
Ruby, he said
Please just let me in.

At those words she was sunken and done for. If he had commanded her or been imperious she would have had her every defence at the ready. But his longing broke her open, and his regard for her, and the power of his deepest, most longing desire.

Oh No she said, as the truth rose in her.
Please Jesse No.
It's OK, he said.
I'm not mad.

I just really need to find out what's going on.

Oh my love, she gasped, and though she clapped her hand over her mouth this truth was suddenly out. Jesse's heart leapt at those words, giving him the courage to ask her further things.

Please Ruby, he said.
I'm a grown man.
You don't need to protect me.

And although she would have said no a thousand times Ruby's heart betrayed her with that word that was suddenly on her lips. Yes. Yes, she said. As Jesse eased her down towards him she kissed his soft lips and she felt again what was stored up within him, all of the hardship that should have ossified into bitterness and yet had only increased his strength, and his longing for the kisses she was now suddenly giving to him.

Jesse fell back on to the sofa, still holding Ruby tight to him, and as they fell she released all of her weight down on to his body and she kissed him, unable to hold herself back. Jesse also kissed her, kissed her as deeply as the Song within her demanded, kissed her with the kisses of his mouth that had been so foretold. As he did that Ruby's heart crashed open to him and they lay there gasping and astonished at what they had created: what had moved within Jesse and surged outwardly just as Ruby broke open in his direction.

As they kissed Ruby sighed and told Jesse: Yes.
Oh god Jesse yes.
Oh no.

It's OK, he said.

I love you.
That truth fell out of him before he could suppress it.

There, he said.
I love you, Ruby Tuesday.
I always have. I always will.
You are all I have ever wanted.
Then these words that left the two of them together.

Oh my Love.

A HEALING THING
FROM THE BANISHED PARTS

THERE are things that should remain secret and yet they burn to be told, for the forgiveness and the healing of the world they burn wantonly to be told.

What Jesse saw, when Ruby lost her mind, when she turned and was suddenly on top of him, biting his shoulder and growling, her haunches tight around both sides of his hips. Jesse straining upwards towards her, Ruby catching his bottom lip in her teeth and saying not yet and saying also: easy, tiger.

Ruby pressing herself hard against him, pulsing hard with her small muscles against him. Jesse trying to relent from his desire but only managing to groan louder and beg her: Please Ruby. Ruby growling again and biting him again and saying. Not. Yet.

Ruby pulsing against Jesse without ceasing, and Jesse shifting in mounting ecstasy and frustration. Jesse looking away and Ruby catching his head as it wrenched to the side, pulling his gaze back to face her and saying: do you like that? With Jesse groaning as he says yes and he says no and he says please Ruby. Ruby don't torture me.

And then at the appointed time Ruby turning suddenly and getting under him, unwound and suddenly vulnerable, and Jesse now released and gathering her up in his hands. Lifting her hips as Ruby says Now Jesse and he holds back bravely saying Ruby there's no going back but she grabs his hips and pulls him hard towards her.

There is one last moment of stillness where Jesse holds her face in his hands, saying Ruby I don't know and she says: Jesse. Shut up, right now, and take me. And as he moves against her she says I Am Yours, and as he moves suddenly inside her he

says the very same thing back to her. Ruby with her head arching back, Jesse's hand there instantly to hold it, and they are suddenly confessing to each other, Jesse in his warm voice saying My Love, Ruby saying Yes, Jesse, Yes as he says again My love, my Only Love.

These things that burn to be told, for the forgiveness and the healing of the world burning wantonly to be told.

BOOK III
(3 Lupa)

CHAPTER 13

The Dark Side Of The Sun

IN the morning Jesse woke very early, before the sun had risen, feeling cool and unravelled as he lay sprawled across the bed.

When he looked with a smile over to Ruby she was not there, but he heard her bumping around in the kitchen. Jesse smiled to think of her pottering there amidst all of the strangeness of the previous night. He looked at the time and marvelled that he should feel so well rested on such a few hours sleep. Jesse got out of bed and straightened the sheets, just enough to make the bed look a little less ravaged, and he pulled on his shirt and walked towards the kitchen to see Ruby.

As he entered the kitchen Jesse walked up behind Ruby, kissing her on the back of her neck. She dropped her head forwards and sighed quietly, leaning her body back into his, pressing herself against him once more. He pressed back against her and then turned her around and lifted her up on to the kitchen bench. She gasped as he was suddenly inside her again, her cup dropped and smashed and she bit his lip and said keep going and he was willingly, desperately obedient to that command. She bit his shoulder hard, this time, and he groaned and suddenly all of his strength was within her, lifting her up with

every surge of it, and she felt some of his full power now crashing within her, driving her insane again.

Afterwards Jesse slumped gently against her, his forehead resting against the top cupboards. He laughed quietly and stroked her hair and said: Ruby. I don't know what you do to me.

She said: it's what you do to me, Jesse.
I am out of my mind, for these things you do to me.

They had some breakfast and after a shower Jesse set off for the office. It was still very early and the morning was bright and cool and Jesse decided he might walk all the way into town from Ruby's little house.

As he walked Jesse smiled broadly to himself. He shook his head and smiled as he soothed his bitten lips with his tongue. His mind was lucid and yet pleasantly skewed all at the same time, and he could not prevent himself from trying to pull together every memory he had of himself and Ruby over the long course of last night. The things she had said, thought Jesse. My God. The way that she was against him, her limbs heavy and supple, the way she twisted and got around him, opening to him so fiercely without any restraint at all.

Jesse sought each memory out diligently and he placed them in order. He moved forwards from the first bite of that tea, and as he got close to work he had nearly finished his inventory. Jesse knew that if these were the last memories granted to him, the end of his time upon the earth, still he would feel lucky to be offered such a bargain. Jesse searched out the last of his memories just as he felt the first warm rays of the sun on his

face, and he thought of Ruby's warmth and the heat that was stored within her. He also suddenly wondered whether she would want him again, and what he might do with himself if she did not want him.

In the cool of her little house Ruby also felt the sun rise. She felt it shine with its great light but she also saw with a terrible burst of dread the dark fire that had now erupted within that same place. Ruby saw the minions of this fire and she felt them begin to swarm, and as she finally understood the danger she had exposed Jesse to she gasped and retched in terror. She went to run out of the front door but she knew that in the sunlight she was far too weak to save Jesse, and that after last night she was also terribly vulnerable.

With trembling hands Ruby found Jesse's number on her phone. She dialled and tried to steady her hands, willing him to pick up. The phone rang several times, and just as Ruby went to hang up she heard a crackle and Jesse was on the line.

Hey babe, he said.
Jesse listen to me.
He paused for a moment and said: OK. Are you OK?

Jesse, she said.
Get in a taxi and go straight to your office.
But I'm nearly…
Get a taxi. Or run, and I mean run, to your office. Stay in the shade. Go inside, turn off all of the lights. I will meet you there.
Babe if this is a sex thing…
Please, Jesse, shut up.
If you love me at all.
Please just do as I say.

Jesse was puzzled as he pocketed his phone, shaking his head at the strangeness of Ruby Tuesday. This woman who could be so expansive in the heat of the night before, who was now so strict with him in the cool of the morning after.

Jesse trotted to the opposite side of the road where the buildings could shade him from the sun. He walked quickly and then broke into a jog, all the while glancing backwards over his shoulder to see whether he could find a taxi. As he ran he smiled and said out loud: Ruby you are a nut. This had better be worth it.

As Jesse ran he saw that it was going to be a hot day, as he was obedient to Ruby and stayed out of the sun. There may even have been a slight shadow of dread that passed over him when he ran through a patch of sunlight, as he felt that heat sear into him until he reached the next patch of shade.

But despite such hints Jesse was entirely distracted by his thoughts of the night before. He knew that he loved Ruby, and that he always had done, and he knew that he would always strive to give her the things she might ask of him. Which was why he was now running like an idiot, keeping in the shade, getting to his office as quickly as possible without understanding anything about the reasons why she might ask these things of him.

As he ran Jesse smiled to think of her.
Anything for Ruby Tuesday.
He knew that he would run to the ends of the earth.
All for Ruby Tuesday.

CHAPTER 14

The Jackals Of The Last Day

AS soon as Jesse reached his office the phone started to ring. He went to turn on the lights and then stopped himself, recalling what Ruby had said. He locked the main door behind him and went to Ruby's desk and picked up.

My darling, he said, you are completely insane.
There was a cough on the other end of the line.
Ruby?
No, Mr Quinn. It's Carlos Lasenex.
Jesse reddened.
Sorry. Mr Lasenex.
It's Doctor Lasenex.
Jesse sighed.
Doctor Lasenex. What can I do for you?

Lasenex cleared his throat.
Mr Quinn. May I speak frankly?
He continued before Jesse had a chance to reply.
I regret to inform you that your evening with Ms Tuesday has put you in rather a predicament.
Jesse started. She told you?
No, there was no need.

Doctor Lasenex I don't know…

Lasenex was suddenly curt. No. You don't know. So let me inform you, Mr Quinn. You are now in the most tremendous danger. You have one chance to be saved, and one chance only. Let me convey you to a place that has been prepared. A place where you will be safe.

Jesse paused. Safe from what?
Mr Quinn.
I assure you.
You do not wish to know.

Jesse listened with quiet resignation as Lasenex told him about the preparations that had been made. The hospital he would be admitted to, the story that would be told. Lasenex was brisk and cool as he explained these things to Jesse.

It may not be comfortable, Mr Quinn.
But it will be safe.

As he listened Jesse kept trying to clear his head. It occurred to him that perhaps the stress of work had undone him, that his mind had suddenly ruptured and left him to go insane. He thought perhaps last night had never happened, except in his own disordered mind. Jesse wondered with a nasty sinking feeling whether this was how all psychotics felt, that even their conveyance to hospital was part of some larger, paranoid scheme.

Jesse tried to press Lasenex for more details of the danger, why he was in need of asylum, but the doctor immediately dismissed those questions.

Saying: there is no time.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Mr Quinn.
Not all of them friendly.
Soon I hope to explain all of this to you.
For now you must be satisfied with that.

As the call ended Lasenex told Jesse that he would be coming with paramedics in something less than an hour. He told Jesse to stay where he was, in the dark as Ruby had prescribed, mentioning her name with a kind of grudging praise. She has done this well, at least. You are safe for now. But you must not open the blinds, or turn on the lights, or unlock your door. Not to anyone, Mr Quinn. Most certainly not to Her.

As Lasenex said goodbye Jesse asked him a final question.
Why should I trust you, Doctor?
There was a pause.
You shouldn't.
You have no reason to trust me.
But if you do not trust me, Jesse Quinn.
Then there is no hope for you.

The line went dead, leaving Jesse alone in his dark office.

After standing still for a few moments Jesse walked over to the water cooler, pouring himself a cup and sipping it while sighing and shaking his head. He felt very confused but he knew with absolute certainty that he wanted his old life restored to him, his life as it had been until the night before. He thought of his clients with their prosaic problems, issues that could be solved or at least ameliorated, and he thought of his former role where they were the ones in peril, coming to him

for help and protection. Where he was not the victim, standing in fear of his life. Where he was not The One, so suddenly, who stood in the line of Fire.

CHAPTER 15

Neither The Hour

WHEN Ruby got to the office she ran to Jesse. Even in the gloom she saw him shine out, and her heart nearly bled to see the full danger he was in. She grasped Jesse and held him, moaning into his chest, and Jesse hushed her and said: Ruby. It's going to be OK. She clutched at his shirt tighter and she said no no no, shaking her head in dismay.

Can I turn on the lights?
No you may not, she said.
He raised her face to his, although she would not look at him.

Babe what is going on?
She said: Oh Jesse.
Oh they see you now.
And he said: Who? Who see me?
Ruby shook. Them, Them.
They see you. They will take you.
I don't understand, he said.

Look then.

Jesse started at those words, because although they were clearly

articulated the voice speaking was not Ruby's physical voice. Her words moved and sounded within his mind without Ruby moving her lips at all.

Jesse looked down at Ruby, her face buried in his shirt.
Ruby how can I hear you in my…

Close your eyes. Her voice within him again. Close your eyes, and I will show you. On that night you saw me you saw into these things, although you did not understand. Let me show you now.

Jesse nodded.
Ok Rubes.
Close them, my darling.
Ok. I'll do anything you say.

Jesse closed his eyes. As he waited he saw nothing but what he usually saw, a kind of predominant darkness with the desultory impressions that swayed and sparkled there. He saw nothing more than that and he told Ruby so, and she told him: keep your eyes closed. I'm not as good as the others.

Jesse became restless, but as he was almost ready to open his eyes again he felt them clamp shut. Although he tried to blink and open his eyes he could not open them, and they stayed closed completely to the light.

Jesse began to panic.
Ruby my eyes…
Shhh. I know.
Just see these things, and I will open them for you.

Jesse felt his eyelids become thick, and profound darkness grew inside of them, and as the darkness became overwhelming he saw past scenes begin to play out against the gloom. He saw Ruby again illuminated, just as he had seen her on that moonlit night. He also saw himself through her eyes on that same night, and he gasped at this shining vision of himself, so completely altered from what he imagined himself to be. He saw the light that flowed from within him, he gasped to see his huge heart beat and flow, how that could be manifest from the outside of his body.

Jesse saw further things. He saw Ruby shepherd his mind on the previous night, he saw the tea he drank and the forgetfulness that was within it. He saw his vast heart rise and turn that forgetfulness back, and he saw his great light slip around Ruby, twisting her off balance. Jesse saw her come spiralling out of control towards him and crash into him, the two of them colliding and merging and lighting up like a sun.

Then came the terrible parts of the vision. As he and Ruby kissed each other a dark fire erupted outwards in a distant part of the firmament. He saw the hideous servants of that fire, separating outwards in gobbets and shards, shrieking and gibbering as they rushed down upon him. Jesse saw that although they would tear him to pieces it was the knowledge of Ruby Tuesday that these devils ultimately sought. Jesse knew that they would divine her identity from the knowledge that was now within him, literally sucking it from his blood, and he saw such terrors in store for Ruby that the spell that shut his eyes was broken and he heaved and broke back up into the light.

Jesse pulled away from Ruby.

It's not true, he said.
Ruby entered his mind again.
Jesse you saw.
I won't let them.
Ruby smiled wanly and said: dear heart you saw.
You cannot contend with them.
But there is a place, where there is help.
Let me take you there.

Jesse sat down and held his head in his hands. He told Ruby about his conversation with Carlos Lasenex, the asylum that had been offered. Perhaps he can keep me safe, Jesse said.

Ruby thought of Lasenex's recent visit and she shook her head with a shudder. I don't know what he is, she said. I don't know whom he serves. But Jesse you need more than hospital. That would be no safer than you are here.

Ruby knelt and stroked Jesse's hair.
My sisters will help us.
Let me take you to them.

Jesse answered her without raising his head.
I don't know, he said.
I don't know what's happening.
But if we are going to go?
We better get a move on.

Ruby made Jesse drink as many cups of cold water as he could stand. While he drank she put his suit jacket on him and his overcoat as well, buttoning it up and turning up the collar. She led Jesse out into the foyer of the building, past the banked lifts and into the concrete stairwell. They hurried down the three flights to the bottom door and they emerged into a tightly packed car park.

Ruby led Jesse past car after car, eventually pausing at a large and expensive European saloon. She touched her hand to the driver's side door very gently, and when all of the locks blipped up she raised her eyebrows at Jesse and got into the car.

Jesse opened his door without getting in.
Ruby. What are you doing? This isn't your car.
I know, she said. And you know what else?
What?
I have absolutely no idea how to drive.

Jesse looked at her.
I'll take that as joke.
Don't. This is an automatic, isn't it?
Jesse paused, and looked. Ah… Yes. I mean I think so.
Well they are easier than stick, aren't they?
But Ruby you can't just…
Jesse, she said, leaning across towards him.
There's no time, my love.
Shut up, get in the car, and let me get us out of here.

Jesse got in. Ruby started the engine and then wrestled the large car out of the parking lot, inches away from scraping the panels

on the concrete pylons as she turned and turned the wheel. She pushed the air conditioning up as high as it would go and she threw her pashmina at Jesse, telling him to recline his chair back as far as possible.

Put this over yourself, she said.
And close your eyes again.
Ruby I can't…
Shut. Up.
She growled at him, audibly this time.
You need to do what I tell you.
Above everything else, do not let the sun touch your skin.

Ruby pulled the car up out of the car park and on to the bitumen. She knew enough to just turn the car in the first direction that she could identify and stab down hard on the accelerator. There were enough places that would do. She felt herself turned with the traffic until she was facing roughly west and she kept on in that direction, easing towards the south eventually. The hot sun searched the road as she drove. The traffic bunched and then thinned out as the blacktop headed out into the hill country that encircled the Great City.

Once out of town Ruby could see more clearly the great meridians that she was searching for. She saw tight junctions in the way the land shifted, she saw the stern soft delineations that drew her sisters towards one another, and also away to mark out their individual territories. As she drove she began to drift further towards the south, seeing the signal mountain that she needed to pass by. Even in the urgency of her journey she had time to grimace at the signs bearing the name of that mountain, as it was not nearly an approximation of its proper name.

As the sun moved past its apex, deflected by the heavy panels of the saloon, Ruby turned into a gravel car park somewhere close to the place where she was taking them. She pulled the car under the protection of a tall bluff, with trees hanging over the car. As she pulled the handbrake on, Jesse stirred and began to elevate his seat from its reclining position.

I fell asleep, he said.
Must have been my driving.
Rubes we really should take this car back.
I'm sure it's insured, she said.
Besides it's only a car.

They sat.
What do we do now? asked Jesse.
We wait.
Until?
Ruby wanted to say: The end of the world.
But all she did say.
Until the sun goes down.

CHAPTER 16

Ultreia

THE afternoon grew soft and shadows gradually engulfed the deserted car park. Jesse slept on for the greater part of the afternoon, recovering his strength from the previous night. Ruby sat there sentinel, glancing at times at the peace that was on Jesse's face, wishing that he could abide in that peaceful sleep forever.

As she sat watch Ruby tried to find them some options. She searched mostly for ways in which Jesse might be absolved of the knowledge that she had so foolishly given him, restored to the state of innocence that had so far protected his life. More than once Ruby thought about bringing the car back to life, squealing its tyres out of that car park, ferrying Jesse to some other form of safety. For why should he suffer? In her helpless love for this man Ruby would have defied every statute of her kind but there was nowhere safe to go and Ruby knew that absolutely. All that she could do was guard him while he slept and wait for the night to come down.

As the evening lengthened Jesse stirred and turned, reaching for Ruby while he was still half asleep. Her heart surged and she let herself go out to him to kiss him, but she broke from that

kiss before it was properly begun and she said: easy now.

Jesse smiled and shifted back in his chair, stretching, and Ruby on her side tumbled out of the car and stretched there in the early twilight. She moved to the passenger side and knocked on the window, and Jesse groaned and slowly got out of the car. As he emerged Ruby saw him scintillate wildly under the evening star, such a slight light as that, and it was only by a great effort that she resisted her desire to take him once again, stretched over the bonnet of the car. All of the things that her body counselled her towards, when she lost her mind, all of the things that she knew were forbidden to her.

They left the car park as the evening deepened. The sun had now set, and its power over them was extinguished for another night. Ruby led the way and Jesse walked behind her, trying to match her pace, the bracken tearing at the legs of what was one of his better suits. There were granite boulders in the path and the way they took was over them, and although Jesse scrambled as best he could his shoes were soft and leather-soled and they gave him no grip. He pressed on bravely but Ruby was very fleet and he kept losing sight of her in the twilight.

Ruby slow down, he said.

Ruby slackened her pace a little but she did not let Jesse catch her. She needed him to move quickly and so she jogged up the rocky track, through low heath and soughing pines towards their destination. The trees sighed and whispered in their strange speech and Jesse felt soothed by them, although there were no parts of their speech that he could understand. He knew in his heart though that the pines genuinely spoke, and that they yearned especially to speak to men, but that men in

their loneliness and alienation could no longer understand what the trees had to say to them.

As the track grew steeper Jesse forgot the soughing of the pines and began to gripe and grumble in his heart. What he was doing here, why he had let Ruby take him on this fool mission. In his pique he cried out to Ruby a couple of times but she was now away and beyond him. Jesse began to sulk and threatened to sit down and stop walking but there was no response from Ruby at all. He was badly lost now, with no choice but to keep walking, stumbling along in the gloom with that unfamiliar griping in his heart.

Jesse was so intent on these reproaches that he did not notice the track level off and the country fall away around him. The track opened out and in the very last of the long twilight he barged straight into the back of Ruby Tuesday as she stood there very quietly catching her breath.

As he stood and breathed Jesse looked around. He saw what could only be the stillness of water, deeper and darker than the night that now surrounded them. He saw the shape of a small lake slowly marked out against its stone banks, and as his eyes adjusted he saw sparks glowing there amongst the waters.

Jesse watched as the shape of the grotto became clear to him, lit by the star-like teeming of phosphorescence both above and below the waters. He looked up to see great stone cliffs curving inwardly in protection of the grotto, then carving back slowly to disappear into the night sky. The phosphorescence began to glow with many colours and its soft glow filled Jesse with wonder, removing any memory of the hard walk it had taken to arrive at this place, the rancour those exertions had bred in him.

Jesse looked at Ruby and saw her close to tears.
This is your people's place, he said.
She nodded as he looked with his new sight.
So far back, Ruby.
So far I can't see.

She nodded again quietly and Jesse knew suddenly that this was her place also, and that it would be so designated for her own daughter Ruby, all in the fullness of time.

At the thought of a child Ruby's heart went out to Jesse but in that same surging she felt such disaster ahead for both of them that she immediately crushed it down.

Ruby grabbed Jesse's hand as he went to say more, shushing him gently and pulling him down to sit with her. As the lights moved there the two of them sat without speaking, gazing at the strange luminosity that grew and filled them with its strangeness, its wonder.

CHAPTER 17

The Twelve

AS Ruby and Jesse sat hand in hand looking over the grotto they felt something like a breeze blow over them, but it was without any sound and the waters were not disturbed by its passing. The pines whispered louder as though they were sighing in greeting, and a strange warmth came towards them from the vast wall overhanging them, like sweet breath flowing towards them without a single breath of air.

They're here, said Ruby.
Jesse squeezed her hand.
I can't see anything, he said.

Jesse strained to see but still he saw nothing. Just as he was about to speak again he saw the waters shimmer and the phosphorescence start to rise up from the surface of the lake. It began to form shapes and then define those shapes and Jesse was astonished to see the shapes becoming human, coalescing in a luminous array that shone out across the waters. The lights massed and grew solid, and out of the formless dark there came the forms of a dozen women, all of them pale and illuminated and sublime.

They greeted the two pilgrims.
Greetings, Ruby Child, they said.
They spoke to her in one voice, like the song of many singers.
Greetings, Jesse, Beloved.
Jesse felt their voices ring in him like a memory, like a dream.
There was nothing he could find to say in response.

After their greeting the women gathered around Jesse and he felt their soft lines of enquiry reach out to him. He surrendered to them instantly, feeling their thrilling touch steal over the contours of his soul, through the broad bones of his body that contained it. As they caressed him they murmured and sighed and sent out their wonder and admiration, in waves that immersed Jesse in the most prohibited, unimaginable pleasure.

In his ecstasy Jesse grew afraid of losing himself, and he reached out to Ruby at the same time as she reached within him.

She said: Jesse.
There is no need to fear.
But do they…
Yes, my Love.
They know that you are mine.

The Twelve then began to sing to Jesse, in their special range and timbre. Their song was intensely familiar to him, for it was the song he had always been nurtured by, although he could scarcely recognise himself in the lines that were sung to him.

Who is this, whose eyes are the Morning Sun
His face as irresistible as the dawn?
Who is it that comes among us

Like the balsam that flows upon the slopes of Gilead?

He is chief amongst the ten thousand
They kneel and wait upon his command
He has no equal in the lands of Canaan
The house of our mothers, the lands of our desire.

He is tall like the cedars of Lebanon
His fruits are sweet to our taste
His heart is a temple
The clouds wreathe his head
His brow is sovereign amongst the heavens
The grasses of the field bend gladly beneath his feet.

When the lines of this song were completed Jesse stayed there in their thrall. The song retreated but only in intensity, and on the promise that it would return to him very soon. Jesse saw suddenly what brave men are so willing to die for, the solace and the praise of these songs in such ample recompense for their bravery. All the brave men of this world, as it is written, giving their lives for a song.

Jesse came back to his senses. He opened his eyes and looked around, amazed to find that these dream-like figures were still arrayed around him. He saw the Twelve shining out in their true colours, and though they were of many tones and hues they were also strangely undifferentiated, the closer to their core he looked.

Jesse went to speak, to utter some words of greeting and also to express his gratitude for the song they had sung to him, but as the words formed in his mind they travelled and were plainly seen, and so travelled back to him via the same route the

answer to his greeting.

Thank you for your song, he said.
The women glowing at his words.
It is your song, Beloved.
You do not need to thank us.
We will always sing of you.

I am glad to be here, Jesse said.
There was consternation amongst the Twelve.
O poor man.
You will not be.
When you know why you have been summoned.

At this point Ruby burst into the conversation.
Don't tell him, she said.
Just tell me.
The Twelve spoke to her in their silent speech.
No, said Ruby.
Let me be taken.
He has done nothing wrong.

And then all of the Twelve and Ruby at once.
O dear child.
It is impossible.
Not this way.
O dear heart, do not…
His choice, his free choice.
No. I forbid it.
O Child.
You are not permitted.
You know, Lustrous One.
There is no other way.

Jesse felt these words mingle and swirl within him, and he grew turbulent and began to feel his courage fail. His fear grew until he cried out for the speech to stop, and then all speech fell silent in his mind. The minds of the Twelve withdrew from him slightly, with a palpable sense of apology.

Thank you, said Jesse.
Now if I may ask …
Ruby cut in: Jesse don't…

Ruby, said Jesse.
I am theirs.
I cannot refuse.

Ruby fell silent, and Jesse reached out again.
Please, sisters.
Please tell me what you would have me know.

At his request one of the women moved forwards from centre of the Twelve, reaching out across the waters to hold Jesse's face in her hands. As she did so her shared twelve-fold sorrow flowed into him, causing his heart to clench and then fall open, her soul breaking open the barriers to Jesse's own soul. He gazed into the bright eyes of the greatest of the Twelve as she showed him the truths that were stored up within her.

O beloved man.
O Man of Sorrows.

O Jesse. Ruby did her best to deny you but you could not be denied. There is some new perfection in you that we have not forseen. And yet you must be denied, for the sake of Our Kind.

O Jesse.
Look into my heart.
Look within yourself also.
Look to see the truth, revealed.

As best he could Jesse did as he was asked. He looked within himself and followed the river of his heart downwards, finding himself immersed again in the darkness that Ruby had shown him when he had closed his eyes for her.

As he watched Jesse saw a light came into the darkness, a cool clear light that owed only vaguely to sunlight. Jesse also saw beings composed of light, constructed of such pure radiance that they shone out like stars against the darkness. Jesse watched these lights multiply and join together and then separate again, in a swirling dance of tremendous grace and dignity. There was only joy in the soft glow that they imparted to the world, their unity with each other shining out and sustaining them against the uncomprehending darkness.

But the Light did not prevail. Jesse saw the dark fire erupt against the void, and the terror that this presaged. He saw once more the hideous servants of that fire as they came howling and gnashing their teeth into the communion of the Light.

In confusion and terror the lights were separated from one another, with many hunted down and extinguished. Those who survived were driven out into the wilderness, hiding themselves in the last cool refuges of the earth, their luminosity so diminished that they almost ceased to shine. Jesse saw the faces of these luminous beings streaked from weeping, and he saw their terrible servitude, their banishment from the

communion of the Light.

His guide entered his mind again.

Jesse, Beloved. You see Them. The Unclean, the Unforgiven. But there come others, also. Born to this lineage, they betray their distant Father and turn their hearts towards the Light.

Jesse saw a long line of men appear before him, a rare lineage stretching back endlessly into the past. He gasped to see himself at the front of this line but so changed, with the light that poured out of him and the goodness it comprised. He saw himself as the Twelve saw him, along with the other men of his kind, and he saw that the sisters were entirely susceptible to them.

Do you see? These men are our Hope, and that marks them out for destruction. Until that day when the One shall arise, Selah. Until then we must be separate, until then we must mourn.

Why should love be forbidden? asked Jesse.
With these good men.
Why?
You know in your heart, Beloved.
Look there to see what is written.

Jesse did as he was asked. As his gaze lit up his dark places he saw what might be called a scroll, setting out in intricate detail the vast history of Lupa. Jesse saw the fear they struck in the wicked, the mission they were sworn to fulfil. He also read the names and the secrets of the Elect, including where they dwelled, and the protections that were available to them to keep them safe from The Unforgiven.

Jesse also saw the names of the brave men who had won the hearts of these women, and by that love marked themselves for destruction. Jesse saw Abel die, casting the world into shadow, he saw Remus perish and the terrors that had flowed from the absolute victory of Rome.

Then Jesse saw the greatest of them all. He saw the great Love that had surged within Him, he saw the devastation of Magdalene who even now held his face in her hands. Jesse saw the manner of His death played out before him, and he was suddenly crushed and horrified.

You killed Him, Jesse said.
No.
I see you. I see you do it.
Look deeper, Beloved.

What Jesse saw then were lies heaped up on lies, the bitter slag of so many lies that history has been compacted from. Jesse choked on these corruptions of the truth, lies told for the protection of Lupa but also slating the world for ruin.

Among these remnants of the truth Jesse saw Jesus and the Twelve, the same Twelve that were gathered around him now. He saw Jesus open to them, especially to Magdalene who had seen Him shine out, just as Ruby had seen Jesse shine on the night of that last full moon. Magdalene had fallen to Him despite all of her defences, she had anointed Him with her love just as Jesse had been anointed.

Jesse saw His love but also His terror when the truth was revealed to Him. Jesus knew that He would be taken, and His

blood drained out of Him, and the secrets that were now stored up in Him used to destroy every one of the Twelve, along with every other woman of their kind left in the world.

The Twelve watched on in horror as this story played out once more, plying Jesse with great gouts of outrage for what they alone could witness, for the truth that they alone knew. The sacrifice of Judas, willingly taken into captivity to buy time for his twin brother, so that He could be safely delivered into death. There were no pieces of silver, there was no betrayal by a kiss. Instead these brothers embraced and kissed each other in their terrible last goodbye, striking each other on the chest to make fast the courage that burned there. The Twelve cried out as these men were separated from one other, each going to what place exactly they did not know but knowing in their twinned hearts that they were utterly condemned.

And in terrible visions Jesse saw Jesus eat and drink and perish on that same night, in the darkness of Maundy Thursday, the sorrow of Tenebrae when all knowing hearts weep in outrage and desolation. Jesse saw His death, and the manner of it, endured so that the people of the covenant might be saved from their destruction.

Jesse cried out to see Judas taken and scourged and tortured, flayed until his skin hung in strips from his body, his brow cut terribly by the thorns they had crowned him with. Judas cried out in agony but he did not betray his brother, he accepted the bitter cup of suffering so that their joint purpose could be achieved.

Only too late did his captors realise their mistake. And still in their hatred and corruption did they put poor Judas to death,

dragging his broken body to Golgotha, mocking him and piercing him as he hung upon the cross. This image that still adorns churches and chapels in every part of the world, like the crosses that lined the Appian Way, the same warning to brave young men: this is the price you will pay if you defy us. The same warning circling the walls of these places, the disgusting profanity of the Stations of the Cross, threatening young men with the same fate that was meted out to Judas. These warnings meant to deter their courage especially, that courage so feared by the perverts and idolaters of the churches of men.

Jesse saw the dread terrors that had issued forth in Jesus' name, out of the few drops of blood that could be wrung from His corpse when they finally found His grave. He saw the psychotic Saul and what he became, so much worse than the murderer he had been. He saw Saul's deep hatred for life hammered out over so many confusing letters that now bound and tormented his credulous slaves, tricked into thinking that that they portend anything other than madness and suffering and death.

Finally there were visions of what might be to come. Jesse saw horrors reach out infinitely ahead of him, and he saw them wrought in his own name of Jesse, the absolute tyranny of his kingdom's throne. He saw whole nations prostrate before graven images of him, his visage become bleak and terrifying, he saw priests and ministers dealing hatred and madness in his memory that was made so disfigured and awry. He saw vast armies surge across the seas in obedience to him, the edicts of an imaginary prophet who never truly existed in time.

There were further visions but Jesse could not continue watching. He broke from the gaze of Magdalene and fell to the ground, gasping with horror at the fragments of the truth he

had been shown. Ruby saw him fall and rushed to assist him, and as the Twelve clamoured in concern she cried out in Jesse's defence.

I will deliver him, she said.
O child.
I will protect him.
O child.
Even as you say that.
You know he cannot be saved.

Ruby howled a chorus of denial and protection but the Twelve would not be moved. Who can repulse the truth, who is stronger than destiny? The Twelve answered with the only words that the truth would permit them to speak.

They will grind him to a husk.
They will eat your soul.
If any of us are to live.
There is no other way.

Jesse spoke suddenly.
Let them take me.
I will not betray you.
I am not afraid.

The Twelve shuddered at his bravery but they took no solace in it.

Dear Heart. You cannot imagine what it is that hunts you. You would not endure their merest touch upon you. You would surrender everything you have just for the promise of death, that death might be granted to you sooner rather than later.

Jesse looked to Ruby and she strove to paint him a version of history in which he might still be able to live. Her effort immediately faltered, and it was all that she could do to provide a vision of him surviving the horrors that would be visited on him in a single hour.

As her strength failed Ruby could not withhold a quick vision of her own fate, should Jesse be allowed to be Taken. He watched in horror to see Ruby torn to pieces, her flesh torn by hot steel and much worse than that, and at this slight glimpse of these horrors Jesse felt himself swoon, and although he managed to remain conscious his blood ran utterly cold.

Must this happen? Jesse asked.
If you remain, said the Twelve.
It is certain to happen.
And there will be far worse also.
For Ruby and for every one of us.

As these words were uttered Jesse hung his head, knowing that his fate was sealed. Ruby moved again to deny it but Jesse sat immobile as she cried out, with the truth clearly written within him.

You saw, Ruby, he said.
There is no other way.

Ruby went to cry out once more but Jesse hushed her gently, asking for the space and quiet that he needed to confirm his choice. The grave election that his honour demanded of him, the only choice that the strictures of his conscience could possibly allow him to make.

Ruby sat silently as Jesse resigned himself, breathing the borrowed breaths of a man who stood condemned.

CHAPTER 18

Here Is Thy Victory

FOR some moments after his decision was made Jesse sat quietly on the hard rock, with Ruby silently holding his hand.

As Jesse sat the Twelve drifted towards him and gathered around him, and despite his fear and consternation Jesse was comforted by their presence. He knew that he did not mind to face death if it came to him in such company, as these women shone and surrounded him with their love and admiration.

Jesse watched as Ruby picked up a smooth stone from beneath the waters of the grotto. She wiped the stone dry with the edge of her shirt, then knelt bowed over with the stone in her hands.

The Twelve began to chant softly and Jesse saw the stone tremble and begin to change. The entire substance of the rock shimmered as it was prayed over before turning suddenly into bread. Without acknowledging his surprise Ruby looked up at Jesse and held the bread out to him while the Twelve intoned in unison.

Take this bread and eat it. This bread of consequence, the bread called Ergo. It will guide you safely through the vale of death,

and it will shield your soul until you have passed over. When you have eaten, so shall we eat, in order to guide you hence.

Jesse took the bread and broke it as the Twelve continued to sing.
Take this bread, and eat it.
As we do so in protection of thee.

After Jesse had eaten they invited him to drink. He cupped the water of the grotto with his hands and it was cool and refreshing beyond what he could have expected, and also laced with something sweet and cloying, like altar wine but more soothing and uplifting than that.

When Jesse had eaten and drunk and the Twelve had partaken also he retched and felt his final meal turn abruptly within him. He knew that his time would be short. He turned to Ruby, who could not bring herself to look at him, and with his hands he gently lifted her face towards his.

Ruby, he said.
It's not your fault.
As she kept her head turned away from him.
It is.
No Ruby.
It is, Jesse. It is my fault.

Jesse gathered her up in his arms but although he felt her tremble for him still she held her face away. Jesse stroked her hair for the final time, but as he tried to reassure her she shook her head and bitterly denied him.

No, Jesse.

Ruby. It's OK.
No.
You'll be OK.
No.

Jesse held Ruby without trying to reassure her further, until he felt his last meal roil and shift violently within him. The cool touch of Magdalene came upon him and she said: Jesse, Beloved. There is no more time. He nodded and kissed Ruby but she remained coiled up and turned away from him. Jesse sighed and left her that way as he turned back towards the Twelve for the final time.

Ruby did not watch the terrible sequence that unfolded over the next few minutes. She did not see Jesse turn back towards the Twelve and have his head anointed with the waters of the grotto. She did not see him stiffen and lurch slowly sideways, nor did she see him begin to cry out and speak in tongues as he lay rigid and pitiful on the hard rock floor of the grotto.

Ruby kept her eyes closed as Jesse sank further. She did not witness him hunch and slaver and convulse, or when he became like a wild animal, scratching at his face and neck as he howled there in the silence.

As Jesse thrashed and sank the Twelve began to chant, and by that chanting guide Jesse gradually into death. In her innermost heart Ruby began to curse the Twelve for what they were doing, and then she repented from that and cursed herself with a dozen times the ferocity. Ruby knew that all of this was her own fault, even in her ignorance, for showing herself to Jesse when she should have remained concealed. She also knew in bitter retrospect that the memory scrub she had given him was hopelessly inadequate for the strength of a man like Jesse, and although the knowledge of such men had been concealed from her for her entire life still she knew that she was entirely to blame.

The Twelve saw Ruby berate herself and they reached out in an attempt to reprieve and console her, although the anguish within her was not susceptible to consolation.

You could not have known, they said.
You could not have foreseen this man.
And there is still hope, daughter.
The trumpets may yet sound.

Suddenly there was consternation amongst the Twelve. As he sank towards death Jesse began to fight back, in that precise moment when death finally called him onwards. The Twelve were surprised and then dismayed by his strength as they wrestled with his soul. The Twelve called on Jesse to cease but he would not cease, the strength within him defying their own twelve-fold strength. Jesse's power even overcame the drag exerted by the Ergo as he fought to remain in the world.

Ruby heard Jesse shout out to her as he struggled to avoid his fate. She was so devastated by his cry that she cried back to

him, despite her efforts to restrain herself. Without any further thought she rushed to him and held his poor head in her hands, and he slackened in her embrace while saying only a single word to her.

Ruby.
This name that he so loved.
I'm here, she said.
Ruby.

As Ruby held Jesse he relented from his struggle and began instead to weep. His tears fell out of him like so many shattered remains of the strength that had kept him in the world. Ruby held him as he wept and the Twelve were able to fall away from Jesse and restore themselves for the end, to guide him into the final descent that was only moments away.

As Jesse was held and comforted he reached out into the minds of the Twelve via some new route that had been created by his struggle, taking these women greatly by surprise. He showed them the full shape of his heart, the wonders that were stored up in it, and the Twelve saw how near they were to their complete destruction, out of the secret strength that Jesse had accumulated to himself.

Jesse spoke softly to them.
I am sorry, sisters.
My courage failed me.
I am ready to go.

Ruby moved again to dissent from these things but as she did so Jesse was suddenly and entirely with her. He surrounded her with the light she had seen in him previously, that night of the

deciding moon, but there is no way to describe the deep abiding that she felt as his soul surrounded her, completely enclosing her soul. Ruby knew that Jesse was willing to go and that she must let him go, for many reasons including the profound bonds of his honour. She saw that his substance as a man would be terribly degraded if he chose to remain alive, with the whole world now imperilled by the life he so wanted to embrace. Jesse showed Ruby some of those possibilities, what he now knew by heart, and the dissent within her died and she knew that he must go.

So it was. Jesse's body sank back and his soul slowly detached from it, receding across the waters before Ruby could think or argue further or buy him further reprieve.

Jesse's soul was ferried out across the lake, and it floated into the indeterminate space beyond those waters until it became hazy and obscure. Through the merest fissure between worlds they saw his soul pass by the outer reaches, and then sink past the dragons guarding the descent into the places under the world.

In another place entirely Carlos Lasenex felt what it was that had slipped beneath the world. He rushed to retrieve what had fallen but there was no means available for him to do so. He thrust out his hands in vain, feeling Jesse plunge past his power to save him and be utterly lost to the world.

No, cried Carlos.
No, No.
O they have damned him.

His cry resounded in the grotto, shaking the Twelve as they prayed for their Beloved, harrying the air in that place before it was cried out altogether. This cry of desolation for another man condemned, another man gone.

The visitors to the grotto felt Carlos' cry rise and tail off, and although they did not comprehend his words or know of their provenance they were not surprised to hear such anguish for the loss of a man like Jesse.

The Twelve held Ruby, hoping to console her, but she felt banished from the Light that united them and she could not be consoled. They would have held her there forever but the darkness was chased from the sky and their retreat was forced upon them. Each of them reached out to Ruby and caressed her but although their compassion fell on her like rain it did not reprieve her at all. For this terrible disaster she had caused, what she had allowed to happen even by bringing Jesse to this place.

The Twelve said their goodbyes as their forms faded and

shimmered upon the waters, their souls gradually retreating to their various parts of the world. Leaving poor Ruby sitting devastated on the hard rock, a slight and motherless child, now bereft of her only love, her form now the form of pity and of cruelty, the sorrow that will not cease in this contingent, corruptible world.

CHAPTER 19

To Break The Cursed Ground

RUBY sat next to Jesse for a long time. She sat long enough to feel the day break and her powers wane again. She sat hunched and shaking with grief but she did not weep, even as Jesse grew cold and the rigor came into his sinews. She saw death take the colour out of his skin, so recently warm and responsive to her touch. It had always responded to her absolutely but it would not respond to her now.

Ruby did not weep. She would have died for Jesse immediately and traded places with him in the underworld but that was no longer for her to offer or decide. Instead Ruby sat there with dry eyes rocking herself slowly, praying for Jesse's safety and his protection even though he was now in a place where such prayers are not admitted, where they remain unheard.

As the night sky leavened and the birds began to sing Ruby felt a tremor come into her that could not be stilled. She shook from the inside out, with the terrible beginnings of a grief that would take her life away and bury it in misery. She stood up and scolded herself but the tremor did not abate, but although she could not stop the chattering that came from her teeth still she did not weep.

Ruby knew she needed to bury Jesse. She knew what They would do to him if they took him, how they would take even the remnants of his blood in an effort to divine his secrets. Ruby had felt his blood course under her, inside of her, and she was not about to let Them take it from him, the blood that had flowed with everything that made Jesse into a man.

Ruby first needed to wash Jesse's body. She pulled him to the edge of the pool and she bathed him in cupped handfuls of the cool pine-scented water. She bathed his wounds, the cuts and abrasions that his struggle had left him with, but although those wounds flowed again with liquid blood he was not revived. Ruby anointed Jesse's head with water, and as it ran down over his cheeks and across his lips the dust there was washed away. The water flowed over his eyes and covered his nose and he raised no word of complaint. She drew more water and wet his hair, stroking it back out of his eyes, kissing his forehead and stroking his hair for the final time.

Ruby knew that she must bury Jesse. The Twelve had promised that they could hide him in this place, but only if his body was sealed safely within the ground. Ruby knew that the grave needed to be close enough to the waters to hide him, and yet far enough to maintain those waters from the putrefaction of his corpse.

Ruby lifted Jesse up on to her back, the dead weight of his much larger body. She carried him slowly up the near slope into the pine forest that surrounded them. Jesse weighed on her like bricks or stones but still she made herself put one foot after the other under the terrible, tragic weight he had become. Occasionally a small noise would come from him, a small sigh

dislodged by her jolting carry. Each time her heart leapt at the sound, but then realising what it was her heart fell back to earth again.

When Ruby had climbed far enough, up to a small saddle with enough flat ground, she laid Jesse's body out gently under the pine trees. She stood bent over with her hands on her knees, breathing hard to regain her breath.

Ruby did not stop to admire the sunrise, or to feel the early sun wash over her and warm her to her bones. She marked out a space with her foot, and then she knelt beside Jesse and scratched at the earth with her fingers. She scratched and tore her fingernails and when her fingertips began to bleed she took up a sharp stone and continued to scrape violently at the earth.

Eighteen inches under the soil Ruby found brutal coffee-rock, and although she did not relent from digging she was forced to take short breaks, a breath or two, to get up enough strength to strike at the ground again. As the morning wore on she hungered and suffered terrible thirst but she did not relent from her task. The sun watched her work as it crept to its high place in the sky, and as it began its journey back down to the western horizon again.

Ruby dug on. She worked silently and brutally, like a steeldriver daring his heart to fail, to find release from the labour that she was condemned to. The afternoon heat tormented her, flies stung her but she did not brush them away. The shadows eventually grew long and the heat softened but still Ruby scraped at the ground, as the whole of her body cried out for rest. She would not halt even when the last light was leaving the sky, until she had disturbed enough ground to bury

Jesse's body.

Ruby dug on deeper and deeper as the sun sank out of the sky.

CHAPTER 20

The Shortest Verse

AS the last of the light died Ruby stood back and looked at the grave she had prepared for Jesse. She took off his clothes and carefully laid them aside, and then with the last of her strength she pulled him down into the space that she had made.

His eyes were closed but his mouth opened as he was moved, and Ruby took a small round stone and placed it in his mouth, and she took two flatter stones and placed them over his eyes. She crossed his hands over his chest and she packed his clothes down around him, as if to give him some protection from the sharp sides of the grave she had dug out of the compacted gravel.

As Ruby looked at Jesse for the last time a tiny wail began to build in her, and she moaned along its line for her fallen love. For his bright soft eyes that were now dark, for his tongue now stilled on a stone she had placed there.

Ruby moaned as she began to cover Jesse's body with the ground she had dislodged, and her lines of sorrow grew louder as he disappeared from view, sinking further underground with every handful of stone and earth that she placed on him.

She keened as every last grain was heaped up, and she did not pause when she found a large chunk of quartz and pried it loose and rolled it to the top of the mound that she had made for Jesse, the grave that she had consigned him to by her stupidity, her desire.

Then Ruby could not contain herself. Against all of the dictates of her kind, the requirements of the very song that was within her, tears began to well in her eyes, and this last time that was required of her she could not staunch those tears. She was lost and distraught and in the darkness there was no one to witness her sorrow, and there was no moon, for it had gone behind the earth, and there was just the darkness within her and without.

Ruby wept. She could no longer maintain her eyes in their dryness and so tears began to fall from her, slowly at first, splashing softly against the dust that she had stirred up from her hard day's digging, the dust that now covered her and also the body of her dead love Jesse.

With that, the dams that had been so carefully constructed within Ruby finally collapsed. She wept great soft tears of desolation, and the more tears that she wept the more she found within her, demanding even as it was forbidden to her that she weep for the loss of this man, who had no-one else to mourn him, whom she alone had loved and by the tragedy of that love had consigned to the grave.

And with no one to hear her Ruby turned from weeping to howling, and she then shifted beyond that to sorrow sounds of terrible majesty and devastation. Her grief was in every pore of her, and it grew louder and more savage until every beast that stood within hearing fell to the ground in shared wretchedness

and despair. Even humans who could not hear her howling in the night were laid low by her grief, some falling to their knees, as the sorrow that was massed within her soul broke outwards and poured into the world.

At the centre of this grief-storm knelt poor Ruby Tuesday, horror shaking every fragment of her being, every part of her shattered by it and becoming one fluid misery and devastation, amidst her howling reproaches against herself. In her sorrow and her shame she did not pity herself but instead savaged herself with accusations, for having killed precisely the thing that she most loved. This poor man whose only sin was loneliness, this kindly light being whom she should have cherished and protected and yet had consigned to the awful silence of the grave.

She felt Jesse's soul cry out to her from the place where it now resided and she cried back, cried out to redeem him but he could not be redeemed. Her vast soul then became utter desolation, a waste land bare and devastated, nothing but the shrieks of scavengers and the damned they fed upon, the very image of catastrophe, the beginning and the end of the world.

Ruby wept for time beyond telling, and her grief went out of her to places both sacred and profane. She wept to revive Jesse, and she wept to bring him back, and she pledged everything

that she had in order to wrestle him from out of the underworld and the clutches of the ones who crouched there.

In the grotesque wreck of her sorrow and her shame Ruby fought and bargained all night. Even as dawn prepared to come back into the world, when she saw portals there between worlds, she made one desperate last effort at bargaining and redemption, and she pledged her soul unreservedly in exchange for Jesse's soul.

As Ruby saw that this was not permitted she fell though all sorrow and became one with the great keening gulf at the heart of the world, the place where all tears run to be remembered, the vast river of mourning that flows out and then returns to its centre, bearing the inevitable tears of all suffering, sentient beings.

With that, Ruby was finished. She felt herself fade, and her fingers bled again suddenly and profusely. She said one last goodbye to Jesse, in sorrow that she had now lost her strength after her night of grief, that she could do no more than she had done for him by putting him safely under the ground.

Ruby's strength faltered and she fell back softly on to the dust that was now mingled with her sweat and her blood and her tears. In the shade of those pine trees, as dawn became day, Ruby collapsed into absolute darkness, a dead sleep that she could not hold herself back from. Even as she wished that that she could go on to much darker places, to redeem what had fallen there, she fell back in exhaustion on the dusty ground and she did not fall any further than that.

CHAPTER 21

A Branch That Shall Bear Fruit

THE light grew and day stole back into the world but Ruby was lost in the darkness, impervious to the seductions of the light. She slept and her soul clung to that forgetfulness. Although her sleep restored some of her strength Ruby would have wished for it to be otherwise, preferring death to any other state, but there were barriers between her and that final destination that could not be overcome, and so she was condemned to come back into the world no matter how long she slept.

When Ruby did return to the world it was by a circuitous route, visiting places for which there exist no adequate words of description. After that journey Ruby's soul returned to her poor bruised body, the damage of her night of grief still written heavily upon it. She opened her eyes and felt the waves of physical tiredness that still assailed her, and the much greater pain in her heart that she knew would never be assuaged.

After she woke Ruby lay still for some time. She stared mutely across the surface of the earth, her breath kicking up the dust she had disturbed, the grave-dust that was now settled everywhere around her. She felt bitterness rise and accuse her when she looked towards the funeral mound she had built, the

raw earth drying slowly in the last light of the sun. Ruby shook as she lay there, and as much as she tried to still those tremors she could not hold her body still.

Ruby lay there and looked for the stone that she had placed on top of the mound but she could not see it. She looked past the now furrowed mound in puzzlement and then in horror as she saw that the stone had been rolled away. She gasped and blinked and looked around and she knew, suddenly, she knew that her grief had sent her mad, like so many grieving women before her, the madness that was predicted in the lines of her own song, brought on her inevitably by the loss of such man as Jesse.

Ruby pulled herself upright. She slapped herself and scolded herself for her stupidity but the mad vision did not abate. She stared at it, and as she stared the vision looked back at her and smiled at her. She groaned to see the beloved smile that she had seen so often, the same smile that she had fought all night to redeem.

The vision continued to smile at her warmly, and despite her misgivings all of the warmth and life that had deserted Ruby as she grieved rushed back into her. Even though she knew she had been driven insane still she clung on desperately to the smile that greeted her, the vision of the beloved face that smiled at her.

As she stared, Ruby began to wonder. She doubted whether even madness could create such a clear vision, or provoke the love that it suddenly moved and revived in her. Ruby doubted especially whether madness could animate such a vision to speak, or to say the words that came in such an ordinary way

towards her, although she could not understand why Jesse would be motivated to say them.

Thank you.
Just that simple expression.
Thank you, Ruby.

Ruby remained still for a long time, looking at him.
Jesse?
Yep.
Jesse. You can't be here.
I know, Rubes. I know.
Because last night…
I know, Ruby. Believe me.
Even for us, this is really fucking weird.

Ruby got up slowly and pulled herself to standing, thinking that her insanity might be shaken off if she stood up straight enough to dislodge it. She thought that if this was only a dream it might dissipate if she hauled her poor body into a position inconsistent with sleep. But as she stood the vision did not waver or abate, and her lost love sat looking at her, smiling quietly in the last light of the setting sun.

Jesse, she said again.
You can't be here.
I know, he said.
How did you get… back?
Jesse smiled at her, shrugging his shoulders.
I'll make you a deal, Ruby.
She nodded, trying to hold back her tears.
You come sit here with me.
You put your arm around me, and hang on to me.

I'll do my best to tell you what happened.

Ruby could not contain a final huge convulsive sob. She then breathed out hard, wiping the tears out of her eyes before they could fall. She moved over to where Jesse sat and she sat beside him, just as he had asked. Jesse sighed softly when she touched him with her hand, and he sighed louder when her arm slid softly around his back to hold him. Ruby for her part shut her eyes and squeezed Jesse hard, and although he felt dense like flesh and blood should still her grief did not allow her to hope, as she closed her eyes tighter and held on to him as tightly as she could.

Jesse was quiet as she held him but he was not reserved or withdrawn. He was simply quiet, and full of a new spirit that had not been within him before. He did not speak for a long time but he somehow slipped open his heart to Ruby, and she saw with her own sight what was now contained in that place. She would have wept tears of wonder and gladness but Jesse had asked her to hold him, and so she clung on to him tightly without weeping or speaking. Ruby would have kissed Jesse but there was no need to kiss him anymore, as all of the warmth and grace of this man shone out in a strait beam towards her, and he was like a sun or a new flame or the return of all of the goodness in the world.

As Ruby held Jesse he began to speak. He spoke of his death, and he told Ruby that although death might seem terrifying it was actually nothing to fear. It is what comes after, he said. There is a jealous and savage beast, somewhere under this world, and you pay him in kind for every joy you have encountered in our human realm. You pay especially if you have strengthened your soul with kindness, generosity, good

deeds.

Jesse continued. I saw other souls flicker there and be snuffed out, souls that were rotten and putrid and cruel, but for me and others like me there is torment beyond description, beyond endurance or even the time to describe. I was suspended in agony that I cannot account for, and I was held there in the certain knowledge that there would always be worse to come. I saw my suffering multiplied for eternity, I cried out for oblivion but it was viciously denied to me.

But Ruby, he said.
I cried out to you.
As my hope faded within me, I called upon your name.
Ruby shuddered.
I heard you, she said.

I know, said Jesse. You heard my pleas. You heard and then like a blinding light, you appeared. My dead eyes could not see you but you were there all around me, as bright and cool as the moon on a summer night. You were there, and you stood for me, and my tormentors were utterly dismayed.

Jesse faltered and he shed tears, but although they shone on his face they were tears of relief and wonder and not of desolation. Ruby wiped his tears and she felt them cool and soothe her, soothe and heal her tattered fingers. She brought her hand towards her eyes in amazement, to see the damage being repaired as she watched. She touched one of his tears to her tongue, gasping at the relief and exultation that swept through her from the merest taste of his tears.

Ruby looked at Jesse.

My God, she said.
What are you?
Hey, Jesse said, smiling.
I was telling you a story.

Jesse continued. You came down, he said. I felt you come, and you loosed my chains, and then I heard such a piercing song of love for me, even in the face of my death, that all of my agony was ended. I was released from my captivity and it was all my captors could do to save themselves, in their terror and flight they forgot entirely about me.

I was lost in the darkness, and I fell down and down, but as I fell I felt your sorrow and your love reaching down to me like a beam of light, or a lanyard. I reached out for it, and I lashed myself to it, and without any further effort of mine I was raised up upon that love that you sent down, and I felt myself burst through the surface of the earth.

And here I am.
He looked down at himself, and then at her.
And what am I?
Ruby shook her head.
I guess I am: Risen.
Jesse looked down again at his body, smiling ruefully.
What is this Light in me?

Ruby did not know how to answer. She knew that this was her love Jesse, sitting naked under a pine tree, but she also knew that he had been transformed and that he now shone with the most extraordinary light. His light was gentle even though it was intense, and although Ruby did not recognise it she knew very clearly it was something new to come into the world.

Can I kiss you? Ruby asked.
Jesse laughed gently and nodded his head.
I hope so, he said.
Why don't you give it a try.

Ruby kissed him with the softest of her kisses. She tasted his tears again, shuddering at the energy and strength that they imparted to her. Jesse wept further tears as he kissed her back, and as she broke off from kissing him he said softly to her.

I don't know how to thank you.
I was lost, and now I am found.

Ruby wiped his tears away, and as she did so she felt further life come back into her tired body. She shuddered with those deep uprushes of pleasure and she said: did I save you, just that I might be saved? And she kissed his mouth very deeply, and she drank of the light that was in him, and she saw how purified he was by his travels through hell, and she was pierced by his goodness and bravery in a way that she had never been.

You are a new man, she said.
I know.
I don't think you do.
No. He smiled gently.
Probably not.

Jesse was quiet for some time, and then he asked.
Do you know what I am?
Ruby nodded.
I know it was foretold.
One was said to be coming but Jesse I did not believe it.

They said I was coming?
I think so.
The One who would be redeemed.
But in my lifetime, she said.
There was no sense to hope for it.

They sat silently with each other for a long time, until Ruby put her head down on his arm and told him: I could sing those lines for you, if you would like. Jesse sighed with deep pleasure and anticipation and he said: please.

So Ruby sang that most sacred part of her song, the prophetic lines that set out in all of their longing the things that had been promised to the People of the Covenant. The One who would be redeemed by the love of Lupa, rather than damned by it. Raising His banner, a true Son-God of the earth. Gathering up the exiles of Judah, leading them back into the Promised Land.

The lines of this song fell upon Jesse like the waters of freedom and reconciliation, even as he puzzled to hear of the light that burned within him, how it would light up the world. As the song touched on that light Jesse remembered a question that he had.

Ruby. Would you tell me what this is?

And before she could answer him Jesse extended the palm of his right hand, outwards and upwards. He knit his brow and suddenly there flashed an intense light exploding from the palm of his hand. Ruby gasped as she looked, for although the light shone soft and beautiful it was also tremendously fierce and acute. The light flashed and exploded into a beam of bright sparkling blue light, and Jesse waved it and wielded it, and as

its light infused him Ruby saw that the light within him was not separable from the blue light that he now wielded. Ruby grasped for her words and Jesse saw them form in her, and they both said the same words at the same time.

A sword.
A shield.
And more than these.

From these events were derived many further events, further things which may be told in the further chronicles of Lupa. Things that for the wise come already announced, through their meditation upon chapter and verse, and also legends inscribed in prose and poems and even baser forms than these. Reading past events as prophecy, and descriptions of future things as events already come to pass. The raising of the dead, incorruptible. A change going to come, like a flood on the barren fields of the earth. The chosen people, their gathering up, their entry to the gates of paradise. And it is for the wise, who know how to read such things, that the final words of this volume shall be given.

Rejoice, Daughters of Jerusalem. Rejoice! For he that was dead is now Risen. Rejoice, O Nation of Judah! For his name is Emmanuel – Light With Us, The Shining One. Rejoice, O Israel!

Here ends the First Chronicle of Lupa.

ABOMINATION 1:1-5

THERE are forces in the world that instinctively seek their own advantage, and counted amongst these are the righteous forces of the world. They battle their adversaries fiercely and they use such weapons as are available to them, with trickery and deception being heavily numbered amongst them. That the result might eventually prove indecisive shall not deter them from their struggle, for only through their constant combat is the balance of the world maintained.

So too are there bargains struck between these forces, in those rare moments of armistice between them. Bargains struck in hope and ignorance, without any reckoning of their true or approximate worth.

So did one such bargain restrain The Abomination until the time that a man should escape from his manifold suffering in Hell. So at the very moment that the root of Jesse was loosed from its perdition, there arose the exact condition for the release of this monster into the heart of the world.

So was the Abomination unleashed. This foulness that had neither integrity nor structure, yet revelled in engorged composition beyond any capacity to measure. This contaminate tumultuous thing, roiling in foul and turbid atrocity. It was clotted star-grime and other corrupted matter; grim colourless degradation coalesced; and far more despicable in form and substance than any of these things.

And it surged forth to make prophets from dead poets, who foresaw its dire waves seething and drowning the ceremony of innocence after many centuries of stony sleep. And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem

to be born?

- P. JULIAN -

FROM THE CHRONICLES OF

LUPA

VOLUME 2

JESSE JAMES

From the Chronicles of Lupa Volume 2
Copyright © 2017 P. Julian
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ISBN-13: 978-1545555248
ISBN-10: 1545555249

This text is set with fragments from those who taught me, along with variations upon scripture. This volume owes a debt to GS especially, for “presenting me the waveless blue sea in the heart of winter.”

for Panth

Thus saith the Lord:

In the day when he went down to the grave I caused mourning: I covered the deep for him, and I restrained the floods thereof, and the great waters were stayed: and I caused Lebanon to mourn for him, and all the trees of the field fainted for him.

I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I cast him down to hell with those that descend into the pit: that all the trees of Eden, the choicest and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, shall be comforted in the nether parts of the earth…

To whom art thou thus like in glory and in greatness amongst the trees of Eden?

Ezekiel 31: 16-18

A SORROWING GOD

LIKE all of those who languish, Jesse found that the nights were the worst. Like all who are interned. Jesse sought the sleep that would deliver him from his imprisonment, shifting and groaning in the formless dark where there was nothing to distract him or console him.

Whether his eyes were closed or open Jesse's mind would not let him be. In the silence of the grey cell his thoughts were unrelenting, his mind working away in the dark. He hoped his mind might quieten if he could manage a few hours of sleep but it was unlikely to come to him stretched out on the hard foam mattress, the rubberised cover and sheetless blankets grabbing and insulting his skin.

Sometimes in those nights Jesse would dream, even in those nights when he did not recall being asleep. In these dreams he wandered about, his clothes torn, his body beaten by the Watchmen of the City. He held out his hands and begged people the same question, asking them to say whether they had seen his lover. They would ask for her name and he would be unable to speak it, and they would deride him and hold him up to strangers, saying: he has lost a Love he cannot name! And still no words would come to his defence.

There were other nights, even other dreams, but mostly there was a kind of dread wakefulness, against the cold dumb silence of cinderblocks, painted in their same cold funereal grey. It was the colour dying men see on battlefields, before death comes to claim them, the grey of shrapnel and spalled metal and exposed brain tissue, the endless grey mud of the trenches. The end resolution of a man's battlefield vision, before he is mercifully unsheathed from reality.

BOOK IV
(4 Lupa)

CHAPTER 1

Bring Out Your Dead

AFTER the joy of their reunion had subsided Ruby and Jesse sat together in the dust, sitting without speaking as the night came down again. They felt the night season agree with them, felt its tenor and impact upon them and upon all others who breathe and seek in the darkness.

The cool dark soothed them but their ordeal had been long. Ruby was taxed especially from her outward pouring of grief, but although she longed for sleep she clung to Jesse with her eyes wide open, fearing she might lose him if she closed her eyes again.

Jesse was simply glad to be back in the world, whether it was day or night, but as he held Ruby close for the warmth of her body he woke to unsettling knowledge, things he needed to tell Ruby although he struggled for the proper words.

I need to go, he said.

Ruby hurried to agree, saying they should go back to the safety of her little house, but Jesse was called on to other places and he softly denied those wishes.

I'm sorry Ruby.
I need to go… alone.
To the place that was prepared for me.
God knows how long ago.

Ruby did not ask Jesse to explain because she knew well enough where he meant. The place maintained by Carlos Lasenex, whom she had defied in such terrible error, who wielded his power without any hallmark to say what he was or whom he served.

You heard him, Jesse said.
When I fell.

Ruby had heard Lasenex cry out on the night Jesse had died, but she begged Jesse to think whether that cry was for Jesse lost or merely lost to him, whether Lasenex might be just one more creature anxious to possess Jesse, to use him for his own malicious ends.

Jesse listened to these doubts but he could not accede to them. You heard him, he said. There is love in him, Ruby, even though it might be severe. A great love and even greater responsibility. I cannot tell you how I know this but much of that love is for me, it is to protect me.

Now he is asking me to come to him. He doesn't demand it, but he cannot allow for any alternative. For my protection, he says. Until I am ready. And so that I can learn, although he will not tell me what.

Jesse shook his head as if to clear it, then continued.

I don't know how this is possible but I constantly hear his voice, like one crying out in the wilderness. He wants to prepare me, he says, to make my way straight. And he says there is work for you also, Ruby, work for you to do separately and alone.

Ruby could not deny any of these things but she could not bear the thought of losing Jesse again. She had once denied him Lasenex's protection at the cost of his life but still she begged Jesse to think of alternate places, alternate plans. For such places as Lasenex maintained are not comprehended by Lupa, who will not enter in, these places beyond the reckoning of justice with their souls unfit to plead.

Eventually Ruby's exhaustion curtailed their discussion. She put her head on Jesse's shoulder and begged for a little sleep, and Jesse pulled her in close and said nothing but comforting words, saying close your eyes my darling as he pulled her body in.

Ruby's breathing deepened and her heart slowed down, and when she had settled completely Jesse gathered her up and stood with her sleeping in his arms. She had never been heavy but she now seemed infinitely light, as if special strength had come into Jesse designated for her protection.

As Jesse walked downhill Ruby fell deeper into sleep, breathing in time to the sway of his heavy bones. Jesse passed the grotto, and looking at those waters he was filled with a fierce protective love for Ruby, showing him what his purpose was in the world and what it had always been. He strode all the way down to the car park, the pines still whispering in greeting, his new strength surmounting every obstacle that had troubled him on the way up.

When they reached the stolen car Jesse set Ruby down gently in the passenger seat, pulling her pashmina around her. He brought the engine back to life and pulled the car out on to the blacktop, knowing exactly where he should go although he was not sure how he had come by that knowledge.

As he drove Jesse reflected upon the things he had said to Ruby, and also the secret knowledge he had been required to suppress. How long he and Ruby might be separated, the pain that this would cause. Lasenex had also been frank with Jesse about the limits of asylum, the forces that were arrayed against him, but although Jesse feared for his own safety he was much more concerned for Ruby's fate if he could not be protected.

Ruby slept as Jesse drove sedately with the cruise control on. The car hummed sweetly up the freeway towards the Great City, then down the arterial roads that bled out gradually towards the east.

Lasenex had been stern with Jesse but underneath those strictures there lay tremendous care and also tremendous responsibility, to provide the best help and protection that the old man could provide. Bonds that were sealed with the promise of Lasenex's own life, pledged to be given before

Jesse's life was lost. This blood pledge that was Jesse's best comfort, and his greatest safety, his to take up before the sun could rise again.

CHAPTER 2

Asylum

WHEN Jesse arrived at the hospital Carlos Lasenex was standing outside to meet him, flanked by two tall men dressed in hospital scrubs.

The doctor presented with his customary formality but he also smiled very broadly, shaking Jesse's hand as he got out of the car, saying: welcome, welcome.

Welcome, Mr Quinn.
It is good to see you.
I had doubted whether we would meet each other again.

Jesse smiled weakly and said that he was glad also, but Lasenex only smiled and tutted at him. I think you might be putting that a bit strongly, Mr Quinn. You are here under sufferance, of course, there being nowhere else to go.

As his host ushered him onwards Jesse glanced back towards the car where Ruby still slept. Lasenex saw Jesse's concern but he moved to deny his request before it could be made.

I am sorry, Mr Quinn. You must enter this place alone. I would say it is not safe for Ms Tuesday, but under present conditions? It is quite a lot worse than that.

Jesse saw with his nascent sight that this assessment was correct, and that any neglect of detail came from the old man's wish to shield Jesse from the horrors that Ruby would encounter if she entered into the hospital. Jesse fought against these truths until Lasenex alleviated his distress with a promise of better things.

I will do my best, Mr Quinn.
To make it safe for a future visit.
But for the time being, as you see very clearly.
She must not follow you in.

Jesse had been gone for some time when Ruby finally woke. She threw off her cover and sat up straight in her seat to see Lasenex sitting where Jesse should have been, alert and upright, staring out over the bonnet of the car.

Where is he? Ruby snarled.
Inside, said Lasenex.
Ruby looked over towards the whitewashed walls of the hospital.
Take me to him.

No.
Yes.
No, Ms Tuesday. I cannot permit you to enter.

Ruby snarled and snapped at this refusal, demanding that the old man justify what he had said to her, and also that he withdraw the refusal he had dared to utter. She was not civil in her demands and she burned to escalate things but Lasenex simply sighed and took them down into that shared space below speech where he could address her more directly, where the proper courtesies would be imposed on them, and the right of Lasenex to be heard.

I have once before warned you, She-Wolf.
About the limits of your knowledge.
And yet you persist in your foolishness.

Ruby was forced to listen as Lasenex continued. The dangers within this place are far greater than any danger without. It was designed this way, for the containment of such dangers. And yet you would doubt me? Without once having ventured in?

Ruby demanded a full inventory of these dangers, with something like a scowl communicated even in that space, but Lasenex merely sank them further below speech to provide Ruby with the only explanation he was currently permitted to provide.

The dangers are manifold, he said. For the ones I keep here? Not all of them, Ms Tuesday, not by any stretch. But some are, as you would call them: The Unclean, The Unforgiven. Names that do not even begin to comprehend their depravity.

Ruby felt her hunting instincts flare at the naming of these creatures, her soul pulsing a deep arterial red, so that even Lasenex in the superiority of his current position felt a tremor come into him.

I know you would confront them, Lasenex said. Your courage, your commitment, these have never been in doubt. But these creatures are without fear, without pity. I swear to you: neither you nor your sisters, separately or together, could prevail over them for a single day.

This is why you hide, he said.
This is why you have condemned so many innocent men.

Lasenex did not intend to wound Ruby with these words but she was wounded just the same. Her chance redemption of Jesse had not expunged her shame at having caused his death, or alleviated the blood guilt afflicting every one of her kind.

None of it was intended, Ms Tuesday.
But you must remember: the dark places.
Within you, as within all.

There was further debate between Ruby and Lasenex as they sat together in the car, and although there were many facets to their disagreement the major focus was upon Jesse and his

safety: whether that could be guaranteed in this place, what purpose might be served by his indentures there.

The argument between the two persisted over many different iterations, but while Ruby struggled bravely she already knew that Jesse would stay in this place, and that she would not be permitted to stay with him. She saw that she had lost Jesse to the care of the old man without understanding why the doctor had been assigned to protect him, or how the balance of light and darkness within those walls could possibly be resolved in Jesse's favour.

Eventually Ruby got out of the car and traded places with the doctor, who stood back from his open door as she got into the driver's seat. He had offered to disappear the car for her but she needed a way to get home, and in any event there were many places this car might take her on the next full moon, ways she could have her theft absolved and made to look like other crimes, perpetrated by people who deserved retribution even if they were innocent of that particular crime.

As Ruby started the car Lasenex bowed stiffly to her, and began to dissolve the shared thought-space in which they had contended. As he took his leave Lasenex praised Ruby for her commitment but Ruby rebutted that praise the instant it was given. Saying that it was the light within Jesse that had always bound her to him, that her heart would go into darkness should his light be lost to her again.

Lasenex nodded and said: your heart, of course, is lit up by him. And I can see that you are deeply illumined. But is this The One who will illuminate every human heart? Who died, and who is Risen? Who is come to redeem the utmost Heart of

the World?

On her way back to her little house Ruby attended to various future plans, taking care of some pressing matters that demanded her urgent attention.

When she finally arrived home Ruby was soothed by the scent of her wild roses, but that was nothing compared to the scent of Jesse that still filled her tiny house. Ruby had prepared herself for solitude but not for Jesse's overwhelming presence, lingering most powerfully within her unmade bed, the twist of his heavy limbs still marked out against her sheets.

Ruby groaned and without thinking further she sank to her knees and put her face into her bedding, the warm scent of Jesse flooding her with sorrow and desire. As she knelt there Ruby begged for his safe return, calling upon every spirit she could name and some whose names were obscure to her, crying out in the last hour of the night as Jesse's lost presence overwhelmed her.

CHAPTER 3

Wounds Like These

EACH morning Jesse Quinn would be brought back sleepless into the cold grey light of his cell. Each morning like every morning, the cheap frosting over the window glass diffusing the already sombre light.

Each morning Jesse would groan and roll about on the foam mattress but his denial of the new day would be wasted. Eventually he would sigh and then throw off his blankets, swinging his bare feet over the edge of the single bed, the cool concrete floor bringing some respite from the hardship of the night before.

Each morning Jesse would get up and slowly wander out of his cell, following the corridor down to the main room of his empty ward. He would greet the nurse sitting behind the glass screen of the medical station, who would smile back as though it might be the best day in the world.

Good morning Mr Quinn.
Morning, Jesse would say.
Did you manage to sleep?

No. Well. Perhaps a little.
I'll get you some coffee.
And your breakfast, if you're ready?

Jesse would nod and say thank you and then sit as his breakfast was brought to him. Although he always did his best to eat he found that food had completely lost its savour, his appetite like his sleep lost through his death and resurrection.

Each morning events followed the same precise course. Jesse would sit and shift in his seat, picking at his breakfast and watching the ward clock move slowly around to 10 am, the precise time that Lasenex would arrive to sit with him and chat and make his observations.

The doctor always greeted Jesse very warmly when he arrived, asking permission to sit with him, and Jesse would always say: of course. Lasenex would perch on a chair and engage Jesse in the same warm generalities and pleasantries, and Jesse would assent to these also.

After enquiring about Jesse's sleep and appetite Lasenex would open his small medical kit, asking very politely whether Jesse would mind showing him the damage done to his body. Lasenex would carefully examine each wound and abrasion left from the night of Jesse's death, wounds that would not heal or scar even under the expert ministrations of the old man.

These are strange wounds, the doctor would say.
Very strange.
They don't hurt, Jesse would reply.
I wake up stuck to the bed every morning, but they don't hurt.

Curious, Lasenex would say. Curious. Of course there have been wounds like these before. Marking various men, for various reasons. Wounds that most men choose to cover, to avoid their... consequences. What speaks from them, what they might reveal.

Jesse would ask for further explanation of these things but Lasenex would just tut and purse his lips, carefully disinfecting and powdering and dressing Jesse's wounds in the same methodical way.

At the end of each consultation Lasenex would pack away all of his things, and then looking directly at Jesse would ask him the same question.

Do you feel ready, Mr Quinn?

Jesse would ask for more detail, what task might require his readiness, but each time Lasenex would evade the question with a strange smile and say: a test, Mr Quinn. Of what you have brought back. Jesse would sigh and shake his head and say no, he did not feel like being tested, and Lasenex would peer at him and then nod his head and agree with him completely.

Indeed, Mr Quinn.
Indeed you are not.
Well. We shall leave it there, for now.
Is there anything else you need?

Jesse would tell the doctor that there was nothing else that he needed, despite the fact that he wanted for almost everything: an end to his stay in hospital, a reunion with Ruby, a return to

his former life. But Jesse knew that to ask for such things would be a show of bad faith, because they could not be given, and that he was condemned to languish in this place until his destiny could be proved, his way onward ascertained.

Although most nights Jesse remained wakeful there were times when he would dream, even in those nights he did not recall being asleep. And sometimes these were kind dreams, soothing dreams, consoling Jesse completely for those moments he lingered within them.

In one dream Ruby came to him perfumed, her fingers slick with myrrh and aloe, and before Jesse could speak she was upon him like lightning, her lips glowing like embers as she kissed him, scorching his dead lips back to life. Jesse went to ask her things but the taste of her dissolved his questions, stealing them from him as her tongue swirled against his tongue.

And there were other dreams. In one of these another woman appeared, and although Jesse knew her immediately he stood quietly as she greeted him, knowing there was no need to speak her name. She came already announced with her hair like sheaves of wheat, thick braids of golden sunshine, her skin all the bounty of the fields. Jesse's heart melted as she smiled at him, and with her eyes pooled blue like oceans she told Jesse that she loved him, and that he had no cause to fear, and as

Jesse bent his head she spread her hands out over him like the outstretched wings of a dove, baptising him in her love that is called the Waters of Mercy and is also The Light of the World.

From these dreams Jesse would emerge especially bereft, these dreams of heat and light giving way to the sombre reality of the dawn, his loneliness made worse by the solace that would be stolen from him as day crept into his cell.

Each morning Jesse would wrestle himself out of bed, sleepless whether he had dreamed or not dreamed. He would walk down through the empty ward to sit picking at his breakfast, the cereal and the UHT milk and the endless instant coffee.

Every morning Lasenex would come to see Jesse at precisely the same time, imparting the same pleasantries and attending to the same wounds, and if he was interested in the content of Jesse's dreams he never declared that interest or asked for those dreams to be described.

Lasenex would always conclude by asking Jesse the same question, a query that was obviously pointed and yet so hopelessly vague. Do you feel ready? Jesse asking each time for more information, Lasenex always smiling obliquely.

A test, he would say.
Of what you have brought back.

But only if you feel ready, Mr Quinn.
Only if you know yourself that today should be the day.

Each time that Jesse refused Lasenex would be in perfect agreement with him, saying as though clearly convinced of Jesse's answer: indeed, Mr Quinn. You are not ready. You will know to answer differently, when the time has come.

Jesse eventually grew tired of this routine. His despair had pushed him past caring very much what the nature of these tests might be, and he knew that the path back to his old life lay through whatever Lasenex had prepared for him.

And so on one morning that seemed the same as any morning, when Lasenex asked the same question, Jesse finally felt his patience break and his decision erupt within him.

Dr Lasenex, he said.
I am tired of this game.
So I am going to call you on it.

I have no idea what you are asking, Jesse said. Or whether I am ready. But I can tell you: I am sick of these questions, I am sick of this place.

So I am going to say: I am ready.
Even though I have no idea what that even means.

Lasenex clapped his hands, smiling very broadly.
Perfect, Mr Quinn.
You are perfectly ready.

The doctor grinned and nodded excitedly, and as Jesse went to

ask him further things Lasenex held up his hand to silence him.

Ready for what, you have always asked.
Well now, Mr Quinn.
Let me show you.
Let us see what you are suddenly so ready for.

Jesse smiled weakly at the enthusiasm that had gripped the old man, who was still clapping his hands and chortling, and he wondered whether the doctor might be quite as mad as the people he kept in his wards. Jesse was thinking how to suggest this when he saw a strange glint come into the old man's eyes, and Jesse realized there was a much more pressing question that he had never before put.

Is this going to be dangerous? Jesse asked.

Lasenex smiled even more broadly. Ah, Mr Quinn. Now I must object to your question! After everything you have been through, everything you have seen. Do you really need to ask?

Jesse went to say no, and then to say yes, but as he thought about the question and the facts of his recent past he just sighed and shook his head and said: Dr Lasenex. One way or another, I need to get this over with.

The doctor sprang out his chair and motioned for Jesse to do the same.

CHAPTER 4

To Those Who Are Bound

LASENEX led the way back down the hallway towards Jesse's cell, then onwards past the other empty cells that made up the high dependency unit.

The passageway ended at a small concrete stairwell. The two men walked down the bare steps turning right and then right again, ending up in a small access area, featureless except for a painted steel panel set flush against one cinderblock wall.

Lasenex muttered as he fumbled with his keys. You would expect me to have better technology than this, he said. But that is the thing, you are only as secure as the most advanced of your enemies. And I promise you, Mr Quinn, my enemies comprise some very sophisticated people.

And where would I hide it?
A door they have not approved.
Leading to what they could never imagine.
And if it were found?

Lasenex fell silent after posing that question, leaving Jesse's heart to sink at the thought of what might be behind the door,

what he was going out to confront without protection or forewarning or any defences at all.

After some time Lasenex found the right key, inserting it into one of the rivet heads securing the steel panel to the wall. He twisted and pulled and the panel swung slowly outwards, a cool rush of air whispering past them as it escaped.

Lasenex ushered Jesse through the opening, closing it behind them to make the darkness absolute.

Doctor, Jesse said.
I can't see…
Of course, said Lasenex.
Just give me a moment.

Jesse heard Lasenex mutter to himself again. After a few moments the walls of the space began to glow softly with a strange diffuse light, exposing a great length of corridor in front of them, leaving Jesse to blink in wonder that such huge space could be hidden.

The voice of the doctor came to him as he wondered. These are my back wards, he said. Established by others, now bequeathed to me. For the patients that are kept here, who are as you might say: the Unclean, the Unforgiven. At least until this point in time.

As he finished these words Lasenex patted Jesse gently on the shoulder, smiling and nodding as if his speech agreed completely with every outward observation.

For souls are infinitely various, are they not?

And what might be between souls and their redemption.
So that even the damned might have some chance.
A chance for which I have suffered them to live.

In his confusion Jesse would have asked about these things but the old man's last comment chilled him into silence. The veiled threat in the gloved hand, the doctor's bland profession of his power over life and death. Lasenex felt Jesse's consternation but what he said next did not allay it.

Mr Quinn you come here as Light of Last Resort. What shines out of you, against the prevailing darkness. What other things might flow, once we prove what you have brought back.

Lasenex said nothing further and Jesse did not ask. They walked on as the floor began to slope gently downwards, passing though cooling air until they reached a metal door at the far end of the corridor. Lasenex touched his fingertips to a glass panel fitted to the adjacent wall and the door slid back to reveal a steel-lined chamber about the size of a goods lift, with another set of doors at the opposite end inset with opaque glass panels.

These particular doors are more sophisticated, Lasenex said. As well they might be. For these doors, especially the ones in front? These are the things that serve to hold Them in.

The men stepped into the chamber, the doors closing behind them. Lasenex pressed some buttons on the control panel and there was a hum of an electric motor, along with a rough abrading sound as if stone were being dragged across opposing stone. Through the transparent panels in the far door Jesse saw darkness interspersed with light flashing and alternating, a

succession of lit spaces emerging and fading as the compartment ground its way onwards.

Jesse was astonished by all of this but the doctor merely shrugged. He told Jesse that many facts about the world were secreted from ordinary people, including the resources available to select people entrusted with selected work, with all of them enjoined against specifying the source of their assistance or the terms on which it was given.

You would be surprised, was all Lasenex said.
What might be available, to those who are willing to serve.

The compartment continued to shake and scrape its way onwards, the light of each cell window burning and fading as they passed by. Jesse grew disoriented with the distance they had travelled, what that said about the scale of these back wards, what dangers these patients must pose to warrant such extraordinary containment.

The compartment eventually ground to a halt with one external light centered in front of the opaque glass panels. Lasenex nodded somewhat wildly as he looked towards that light, his fingers hovering over the release mechanism that governed the front doors.

Are you ready? he asked.
No, replied Jesse.
But I'm guessing you're going to open that door anyway.

Lasenex laughed quietly, bowing a little as he did so.

You are learning, Mr Quinn.

But you are safe, I assure you.
You'll see what I mean, once I open this door.

CHAPTER 5

Man Infestation

THE doors slid open and the two men stepped into a room roughly the same size and shape as Jesse's cell: the same bed fixed to the floor topped with a rubberised mattress, with no other furniture at all.

At first Jesse thought the cell was empty, but then he saw a man crouched up on the bed, pressing himself into the far corner of the room. The man wore a grey jumpsuit cut from some dull material, so that with his pallor and his slight frame he was scarcely visible against the grey walls of the cell.

Kindle your fire, said Lasenex quietly.
I don't understand…
Do it, Mr Quinn.

Jesse looked down at the palm of his right hand to see his light spark there once again, flashing and soaring out of his open palm. The light grew and consolidated into a beam of brilliant blue fire as Jesse stood with his hand outstretched, the same blue light suffusing him and shining out as one with what he was.

Lasenex stared in frank admiration to see this light for the first time. This light prophesied by so many, now made manifest in the world, although none could say what it signified, what it might foretell.

Jesse went to ask Lasenex what he knew about this light but a strange growl and giggle cut that enquiry off, these noises coming out of the prisoner still crouched up on the bed. The man's face snapped towards them, glowing sickly in Jesse's blue light, and through his bared and filed-down teeth the prisoner began to speak.

Are you here to kill me?
O say that you are.
The Old Man will not let me live.
But the Old Man will never let me die.

Steady, said Lasenex quietly.

The prisoner looked puzzled as he gazed towards Jesse's light. He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head in suspicion before rasping out further words.

What is this light? he asked.
What does it portend?
Why does the Old Man bid you to wave it at me so?

O I see. I See. This is what you stole, from the place where you were fallen. But this is hubris, Son of Man. This is emptiness and deception. You feel that you are special? Because you suffer, you must be special?

Lasenex grasped Jesse's left arm as if to steady him but Jesse felt

the tremor that had come into the doctor, despite his long experience in dealing with such creatures. Jesse took no comfort in that grip as the wretch continued to hiss and sway, seeking to make an alliance with Jesse against Lasenex and his kind.

Saying: Son of Man you are one of us. We sought for you, that day you were revealed, that night the witches killed you. There was much weeping, Son of Man, when we lost you, when you fell.

The creature shuddered and began to shed tears, and Jesse was seized with a desire to placate that sorrow. But as he watched Jesse was sickened to realise that these were false tears, show tears, squeezed out of a creature only sorry for itself, savoring its own tears for the salt that was within them. Tears that dried abruptly once the creature drank his fill.

And now the Jackal has you. Held here, as he holds us. You believe his lies, that this is to help you? Then pick up your bed and walk, foolish son! See if he will let you!

Jesse stood in horror and revulsion, watching this creature writhe and shake and spit its words at him. This thing inhuman in everything but its upright form, now just the skin and bones of a man infested with something else entirely. Jesse heard its taunts but he did not answer them, causing the creature to spit out further things.

So. You would betray Us. Now your blood flows with her blood, now you reek of her flesh. But We do not ask, Son of Man. We Demand. Surrender her to us! As you surrender yourself!

Blasphemer! Apostate! You come from the King of Kings, who begat the Fish God, who fell for His sake. He kills his sons, for it is right to do so. You descend from A'har'ham the obedient, who stretched his son on the pyre before the she-devils spirited him away.

Bend your head, Son of Man.
Stretch yourself across His Altar.
He demands His sacrifice, His burnt offering.
It will be rendered unto Him!

Jesse saw the man crouch back and tense his sinews, and then launch himself across the room. Jesse instinctively shot out his right hand but although his flame sparkled fiercely it did not repulse the attack. Jesse braced for impact but Lasenex was watching, seeing these familiar things as though they were occurring in slow motion. He saw Jesse fail to repulse the creature, saw its teeth bared and ready to bite down on any part of Jesse it could reach, and the old man sighed quietly and squeezed the small device he held in his left hand until he felt the switch click.

As soon as Lasenex activated his device the attack against Jesse was blunted. The prisoner stiffened and toppled over sideways to land convulsing on the floor, his back arching and pulling him away from Jesse, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Jesse gasped and staggered back against the opposite wall of the cell, his light now completely extinguished. He grasped at his throat to see whether any damage had been done, and as he tried to regain his breath Lasenex looked back at him with a gentle, apologetic smile.

I am sorry, Mr Quinn.
He was under my control.
I just needed to give you a bit of time.
To see what might… result.

Jesse breathed hard, looking at the pitiful figure convulsing on the floor.

How did you do that? Jesse gasped.
With this, said Lasenex, holding up his device.
I have some electrodes planted within his brain.
I can activate them any time I wish.

As Lasenex held up his little controller for Jesse to see he released the switch that he had pressed, cutting the current flowing through the patient's brain. The wretch stopped convulsing and lay groaning on the floor.

The two men stood in the stark room, waiting until Jesse had recovered. Lasenex looked back towards the metal compartment, causing Jesse great relief until the old man asked him: onwards?

Jesse had thought they might go back to his ward and he told Lasenex so, pointing out that his light had done nothing, that it had completely failed the test. Lasenex listened but he pursed his lips as he did so, saying:

This is just one subject, Mr Quinn.
A sample size of one is not a sample.
As you may have guessed, if you have the stomach for it.
I have plenty of others to try.

Every time they hoped it would be different, and every time events unfolded in exactly the same way. Jesse and Lasenex went from cell to cell to confront these patients only to be harried and insulted and then viciously attacked, with Lasenex ending each confrontation by his kill switch and the convulsions it produced.

Jesse would kindle his light only to have it ridiculed and demeaned. The prisoners sneering at Jesse as his light shone in his hand, leering at him amidst their hacking coughs and their demands. That Jesse should submit to them, and surrender Ruby to them, and bow down before their Gods who lust to humiliate and enslave.

These creatures knew Lasenex was impervious to their wiles so they focused their hatred upon Jesse. They insulted him and disparaged him with endless excoriating names, calling him grave-meat and man-slave and the used-up ration of whores, their mouths seizing on every insult that could be hurled. They called him death-cheat and grave-dust, they slandered him with the words of every insane saint, every depraved prophet of history. They spoke of his redeemer especially with ugliness and contempt, naming things in Ruby that Jesse was sickened to hear named, all for the pleasure of the degraded souls who spat these things at him.

And they called him coward, coward, they asked whom he had killed and they laughed because they knew he had killed nobody. They called him weakling, simpleton, they laughed at

his conception of justice and they goaded him to agree, saying that all men were foul and wretched and corrupt, the same things that the princes of his church had always flung at him, the slander and accusation that drives the religions of men. They screeched that God is One, that their God was the One God and that He would strike down upon unbelievers, and strike at Jesse especially for turning against his God, denouncing this usurper who would make the name of God reviled amongst the nations.

Jesse was trained in words and he had some resistance to these taunts, so whilst they struck him violently he maintained some immunity against them. He fought against the words that slandered Ruby but at the same time he was comforted by the mention of her name, despite the efforts of these tongues to twist her name and smear it.

Jesse resisted and his accusers saw him do it, even though much of his resistance came out of weariness rather than any particular courage. And when it became clear that Jesse would not be overpowered by their taunts these wretches would coil back like vipers and strike at him, launching themselves at Jesse with their teeth bared and their fingers grasping for his throat.

Lasenex watched each confrontation tight with hope that Jesse's light might prevail, but each time the old man was required to activate his device and bring the prisoner crashing to the floor, thrashing in the seizures brought on by the electrons flooding through their brain.

Each time the two men had the same conversation.
It's not working, Jesse would say.
Keep trying Mr Quinn.

I am trying Doctor.
I don't know what else I can do.

Jesse tried everything he could think of but his efforts came to nothing. He would hold and shape his light differently, shining it straight out in front of him and then raising it up, fanning it across the whole of his body as a fine blue shield that failed to shield him from anything. Jesse found that he could intensify his light upon a single razor-sharp line, but although that blue lightning crackled and flashed wildly along its length, taking all of his efforts to restrain it, still that razorlight came to nothing.

Lasenex began with hope for Jesse and the light that he wielded but he grew discouraged as Jesse's efforts were thwarted. The old man saw each excursion end in the victory of contempt, the greater negation of Jesse's light and the darkening of his soul.

The prisoners knew what device Lasenex wielded and as the days wore on they would merely toy with Jesse's light, pushing their hands and heads into it to show themselves entirely impervious. Jesse became demoralised and soon he hardly tried at all, leaving the cool blueness to sputter in his hand while the prisoners laughed at him, their derision killing off the last of the fight that Jesse had left within him.

Gradually these confrontations degenerated into complete stalemate. Jesse stood without hope and the creatures stopped bothering to leap at him, so that Lasenex began to hold his kill switch very loosely, without any cause to use it. The prisoners giggling in their mirthless superiority, showing Jesse the smug smile that is the final indicia of such victories.

Back on the empty ward Lasenex would try to rouse Jesse.

There are more cells, he would say.
More possibilities.

With Jesse responding less and less.
I have tried, he would say.
There is no point.

Lasenex would not be deterred.
Mr Quinn, he would say.
I can assure you, there most definitely is a point.

With Jesse and his patience finally at an end.
Then show it to me, Carlos.
Show me the fucking point.

Time wore on. Jesse would go with Lasenex to the back wards but apart from that he moved less and less, the despondency of his captive life getting into his bones and sequestering itself there. Made worse each day that Jesse encountered defeat, leaving his courage to fail badly and his heart to go into darkness.

Eventually Lasenex stopped taking Jesse to the prisoners, saying: some time, Mr Quinn, I think might be in order. Jesse nodded listlessly without bothering to argue, knowing that Lasenex preferred his own view about such matters whether he agreed with him or not.

In the increased hardness of his nights Jesse confronted himself, asking what he was doing in this awful place, whether he really knew anything anymore. His dreams and his wakefulness merged into one blurred sense of unreality, a dreamscape grey and inchoate, making less sense every day.

As Jesse sloughed into despondency his mind began to play tricks on him. He had hollowed out his narratives by going over them too often: the memories leading to his night of love with Ruby, every crazed thing that had happened to him since. The grotto and the Twelve, his death and resurrection. His memories became more dream-like the more he went over them, the less he slept, until he saw very clearly that these were unreasonable things, fantastical things, things that might be imagined but lacking any connection to reality.

Jesse sank as he combed his memory flatter and flatter. He began to wonder whether he was still dead and never resurrected, languishing in some purgatory peculiar to his own soul, a staging or testing place for souls whose merit had not been ascertained. Jesse saw that Lasenex would be a fine keeper of such a place, with the tests he set and supervised, wanting Jesse to prove himself brave enough or enduring enough to move on from this provisional realm.

Jesse began to clutch to this understanding because another possibility ripened in him, one far more in in keeping with his current condition. That he was restrained in this common place for the common reason, the simplest explanation coherent with the known facts, needing no recourse to narratives that grew in their strangeness and fictivity every day that Jesse rehearsed

them.

Not that, he prayed.
Quite to whom he did not know.
Please not like that.

Jesse resisted this explanation because all it offered him was loss, a brutal gouging of the best parts of his life. Those times when he strong despite his loneliness, his solitude soothed by the consolations of his honour, the steadiness lent to him by his seamless, well-ordered mind.

Then there was Ruby. Everything that Jesse had wanted from her, and his much greater desire to give things to her, to love her as she deserved to be loved. Jesse begged for this part of his delusion to be maintained, at least for as long as possible, the way that dreamers do when they are about to exit a particularly beautiful dream. This fantasy that Jesse had sold himself now becoming exposed, leaving him alone amongst the squalid remains of his mind, with all of it lying wrecked against the ugly prospect of pity, which Jesse now saw as the cruellest prospect of all.

CHAPTER 6

Noli Me Tangere

AS soon as the phone rang in her little house Ruby knew who was on the line. She also knew the message, the better part of it anyway, and that knowledge made her tremble. She would have picked up immediately but she forced herself to breathe, carefully and deliberately, waiting for three rings before answering the phone.

Lasenex was typically direct. He engaged in some brief pleasantries but did not waste any further time, speaking in terse terms about Jesse and the state that he was in. He asked whether Ruby might visit Jesse, as soon as she possibly could, he spoke of preparations made to guarantee her safety.

I can keep you safe, Ms Tuesday.
For an hour or so at least.
If you will come.
I can restrain Them for that long.

Ruby was torn between her concern for Jesse and her desire to see him again, to touch him with her burning fingers and to kiss his mouth once more. She asked whether Jesse needed anything brought to him but Lasenex dismissed the idea.

Just bring yourself, Ms Tuesday.
It might help him, if he sees you again.
But I will not lie to you.
In the state that he is in?
Even your beloved presence might not be enough to reach him.

In quick time Ruby showered and dressed and before very long she was at the hospital, being ushered by two nurses into Jesse's empty ward.

She found Jesse sitting at a table with his lunch laid out in front of him: a plastic tray with plastic implements, a styrofoam cup of coffee. Although Ruby's heart leapt to see Jesse it also bled to see him so changed, with his hair matted down so strangely, his posture lately slumped to the shape of a much older man.

Ruby put on her best smile.
Jesse, she said softly.
To speak his beloved name.

At this greeting Jesse looked up at Ruby, as she stood there smiling at him. She saw his face light up with his great love but then a shadow crossed his face to take that light away, as he eased himself up from the table to embrace her.

Jesse's strangeness persisted as he hugged Ruby. She felt his body grown slack, his soul sunk within him as well, and as tightly as she squeezed him he did not respond to her touch at all. Ruby was so dismayed by this that she broke out of their embrace.

Ruby was lost for words but then she remembered something. I brought you a present, she said.

She rummaged in her bag and came up holding a small block of fine chocolate, and a black notebook with a pen sticking out of the spine. I thought they might help, she said. Jesse was gracious as always and he thanked Ruby for her gifts, but his eyes remained averted from her as he held them in his hands.

They sat and Ruby did her best to chat but she felt deprived of speech, out of her concern for Jesse but also the anger that flared in her at the change in his feelings towards her, feeling ashamed for that anger the instant it arose.

One of the nurses brought Ruby a cup of tea but she felt too sick to touch it. She cast around desperately for conversation and found herself speaking of practicalities, various aspects of Jesse's legal practice and the arrangements she had made. Just as Ruby got to telling Jesse about the locum she had interviewed she saw a tear fall from him, splashing down heavily on the wrapper of the chocolate that he held in his hands.

As Jesse bent his head and wept quietly Ruby gave up her pretense at chatter.

Jesse, she said.

Please talk to me.
I can't stand to see you like this.
Please tell me what's going on.

Jesse sighed and wiped the tears from his face, but when he shook his head and tried to compose himself he only dislodged further tears.

I know what has happened, he said finally.
Ruby grabbed his hand.
Jesse I know…

Ruby, he said.
Please just… stop.
I know you want to help me but please, Ruby.
I don't understand why you won't just be honest with me.

Ruby felt a horrible crashing feeling as Jesse said these words, feeling his heart recoil from her, the first time she had ever felt him withhold anything from her at all. In a quivering voice she asked Jesse to explain what he meant but he just waved his hands in wordless explanation, gesturing towards the bleak grey walls of the ward. Ruby wished that he would speak but she immediately wished otherwise once Jesse found his words.

I know where I am, he said. I know why I am here. The staff care for me very well but I don't understand why everyone has to lie to me. Lasenex especially, although I don't think much of that is real.

Ruby stared without comprehension as Jesse continued to speak.

I know what has happened, Ruby. You don't need to pretend. I don't know how far back it goes, how long I have been deluding myself, but I have to say: it feels like it goes back a very long way.

Ruby gasped and held out her hands to implore Jesse against this madness but he would not look at her. She went to say things but there was only one word she could manage. No, she said. No, Jesse. But Jesse in his extremity was now well beyond her reach.

Yes, Ruby, he said. You don't need to prop me up. I appreciate everyone's efforts, really I do, but they have begun to feel patronising, even cruel. I know you mean well but I need to face up to this, I need to get my head straight and get better and get myself out of here.

But even if I do?
I don't see how I can recover.
I don't think my old life is ever going to come back.

Ruby began to feel unseated by Jesse's speech, by his obvious suffering but also his distance and his coldness towards her. Seeing him put such an end to himself, seeing him put an end to the two of them as well.

Jesse sighed to see this pain rise in Ruby. You see what I have brought you, he said. You came to work for me and I transgressed those boundaries, I owed you my respect and I showed you just the opposite.

I'm sorry for all of it, Ruby. To have kissed you, if that even happened. And I'm sorry for all of the trouble that I have

caused you since.

But Jesse…

Please, Ruby. I have the best of help. The pills Lasenex gives me, for my blood pressure, for my sleep. I know what they are. I know they'll help me get better. I'm just hoping they kick in soon.

But Jesse…

Please Ruby. You should go. There's plenty in the cash account, you should pay yourself for as long as you need, until you find somewhere else to go.

Ruby began to sob quietly and Jesse could not bear to see it. He felt her sorrow more keenly than his own sorrow, multiplied by his shame that after all he had put this woman through he should be causing her further tears.

Jesse saw her heart collapse and his heart collapsed also.
Please Ruby.
I can't bear to see you suffer.
Not when all I have ever wanted is...

What, Ruby said.
What have you wanted?
Jesse shook his head slowly.
It doesn't matter, he said.
It was insane.
No Jesse…

Yes, Ruby. It was my longing, my loneliness. All of the love I

wanted to give you, when in reality I had nothing to give to anyone.

Don't say that, she said.
It's true, Ruby.
I appreciate your kindness, your coming to visit me.
But even that is painful to me now.

Ruby reached out for his hand but Jesse pulled it back.
Don't, he said.
Don't touch me.
It only makes it worse.

At Jesse's rejection of her touch Ruby was cast down. The tethers of her soul scythed, her various parts left to spin viciously out of control. She sank into a bleak fugue where she no longer knew where she was or what she was or what she thought, no longer comprehending Jesse or what he was doing to her, his coldness and rejection of her done in the name of Love.

Ruby got up from the table and looked around wildly. She felt like striking Jesse or worse, so roused were her hunting instincts. She felt terrible fury but also profound waves of pity for this man put to such extremity, who would wound her even as he tried to protect her. *Don't touch me*. Ruby was wounded even by his courtesy, showing that his heart was now closed to her, leaving her to linger outside of his gates along with every other hungry ghost that leered and longed for Jesse from the other side of his threshold.

Ruby lurched over to the locked doors of the ward and banged on them, yelling out for the nurses, and when those doors were

opened she rushed straight out of the ward.

After Ruby left Jesse sat there dull and disgusted with himself, with his comfortable self-loathing that had caused another woman to suffer. Seeing why his mother had always heaped such scorn upon his head, proving all of the contempt and accusation she had ever heaped up against him.

CHAPTER 7

A Spring Shut Up

RUBY eventually made her way home from the hospital, arriving without any recollection of the route she had taken or the time she had taken to travel it.

Ruby fell down on her battered sofa with her heart in pieces. She would have made tea or sought some other solace but she knew there was nothing that could comfort her.

Her people could not help. Even the luminous spirit of her mother, who stayed with her into the night. They were divided into those who had loved men and those who had not, and those who had not loved men could not comprehend her sorrow, and those who had loved men were left shattered by it, by the disaster and death it had caused. And not one of these women had felt the scorn of a living man, this fate much worse than death, to be sent away in contempt or consideration with the cruellest of all injunctions: *do not touch me*.

Ruby railed against Jesse but every time she went to strike at his memory she was overcome by her pity and concern, and every time she tried to clasp his memory close she felt scorned by his words again. Reflecting those times that she had scorned him,

those times she was required to maintain her distance and so had rejected his love. Ruby also knew that she had brought this disaster upon Jesse, whose life had been so simple before she entered, a death he did not deserve and his consequent suffering, his love for her dragging him both ways through Hell and now into the place where he languished.

Ruby could not be comforted. She swung between her fury and her pity, she suffered for Jesse's suffering and the shame of bringing him to shame. Hemmed in by rage on her right hand and sorrow on her left, with no way to steer back from them and no way to journey through.

CHAPTER 8

And The Word Was

NIGHT after night Jesse lay sleepless in his empty ward, listening to the rising commotion outside of the locked doors that secluded him from the other parts of the hospital.

Lasenex had alluded to this intensification in his usual cryptic manner, suggesting some escalation in the number of admissions, the severity of presentations. The old man apologised for the impact on Jesse's sleep but Jesse just shrugged and said that sleep seemed to have abandoned him whether things were noisy or not.

One night was so full of shouts and screams that Jesse lost his patience. He lurched out of his bed and walked down the empty corridor, thinking he might find a nurse who could dispense a few more sleepers, or perhaps just a cup of tea to distract him for a few minutes.

When Jesse reached the main room of his ward he stopped abruptly, suprised to see the double security doors now wedged firmly open, and beyond them the open corridor leading to the other parts of the hospital.

Jesse stared dumbly for a few moments. These doors had always been shut, unless a nurse was there to open them, and they were always locked securely after they had been closed. Lasenex had insisted that these doors were secured to protect Jesse, to cloister him until he was stronger and his powers had been proved, and yet on this night the doors stood open and completely unattended.

As he stared at the open doors Jesse took them for a sign. He saw himself called to go out and join with the other patients in their rancour and insanity, now that his own mind had ruptured, his own sanity failed. Jesse saw that he not only belonged amongst these patients but was fact the very worst of their kind. He also saw very clearly that Lasenex had lied to him about these doors, pretending that Jesse was protected by them when it was clear that he was the one restrained, that he was the One against whom all others needed protection.

Consumed by these ugly thoughts Jesse stormed out of his ward and into the dark corridor, turning slowly with its curved walls towards the light of the main ward. The noise grew as he approached, resolving into frightening complexity: screams of every sort and every variety of laughter, with the strangest high ululation soaring over the rest, the whole of it some flat-chorded horror of pipes and bellows, heaving and groaning in a sickening simulacrum of music.

As Jesse walked towards the open ward his anger grew in him. For the first time in his life he did not suppress that rage or seek to divert it, and it grew in him like thunder. His pace quickened as this old rage burst in him, an explosion of outrage and indignation at these deranged creatures and also at himself, and above all at the cruel god who would suffer such

things to exist, who would visit madness upon Jesse despite his every conformity to His rules.

Jesse strode out faster as his fury shot upwards through his body, then flattening outwards like the incalculable rings of a planet as he burst through the doorway into the open ward.

Silence!

This commandment shot out of Jesse as a spoken word but it also surged outwards in a shockwave of wreathed blue flame. The Light of the Word made manifest, blowing back against the darkness. Leaving every inhabitant of that place shocked into silence and stillness, out of their compulsion to what had had flamed out of Jesse and filled the four corners of the room.

Jesse stood in the doorway with the glow of his authority still upon him, with every eye in the room either fixed on him or looking downward in obeisance. Many stood but many had been thrown to the ground, all of them overcome by the power of what had flamed out of him.

As the Word subsided various patients shifted and began to look insolently towards Jesse. One man detached himself from the wall he was flattened against, seeking to swell against Jesse as he stood there glowing and building in the power of the Word again.

Stand down, said Jesse.
The creature still slinking forwards.
I said. Stand. Down.

The creature saw the power build in Jesse again, feeling itself

condemned by the Word even as it built. The creature held itself steady for a moment, seeking to manoeuvre against Jesse, but with only a hint of his power released Jesse immediately prevailed. The creature scuttled back to the wall in total capitulation, pressing itself against the cinderblocks, unable to look in Jesse's direction.

Is there anyone else? Jesse asked.
Gazing around impassively.
Anyone who wishes to contend with me?

Jesse looked around the room and he saw there were none. He saw innocents staring at him in wonder and disbelief, he saw various Unforgiven coiled fearfully against the walls.

Thank you, Jesse said.
Please go about your business.
But do it quietly.
There are people who are trying sleep.

As Jesse turned to go back to his ward he saw Lasenex sitting in a dark corner of the room at a plastic table. The doctor was nodding his head vigorously, and as Jesse looked towards him he burst into a broad smile, leaping up from the table and coming over to congratulate him.

Well done Mr Quinn, said Lasenex.
Shaking his hand and smiling, smiling.
My instincts sometimes fail me, but they were good in this.

Lasenex smiled to see Jesse slowly realise that the open door had been the doctor's own design, leading to Jesse coming into the room and coming into his power. Jesse felt some annoyance

at this but Lasenex smiled so broadly that he also began to smile, shaking his head in resignation.

For god's sake, Doctor.
I could have been killed.
Indeed, said Lasenex, smiling even more broadly.
But you were not.
Instead: you have prevailed.
And what is more?
You seem to have found your voice.

Jesse thought about that, and he eventually said: no.
No, Dr Lasenex.
No?

No, Jesse said. My voice is nothing. I have been talking for my entire life, and look at where it got me. I rather think what I have uncovered might be better referred to as: The Word.

Lasenex began to nod his head as he thought upon this point, nodding in general and then absolute agreement with Jesse. He gestured for his charge to come and sit with him, as the whole ward watched on, to discern how the two of them might utilize Jesse's revealed strength, to structure their way forward and put a purpose to his powers.

The two men concurred and contended gently into the night. As they worked Jesse's light grew out to cover them, a shining dome shielding out everything exterior to their conversation. Leaving the innocent and the condemned to watch on in wonder, with none returning to their beds, with both men illuminated past the pole-point of deepest night as they spoke of that light and its power, elucidating the many ways that it

might be brought to bear.

CHAPTER 9

Fiat Lux

THE next morning Jesse rose without having slept, but he felt refreshed by the deeper compact with his powers he had entered the previous night, the true nature of his inner light and the paramount Word that suffused him.

Jesse ate a quick breakfast then went to find Lasenex. The doors to his ward were now permanently chocked open, and as he walked down the corridor towards the main ward there was a discernible hush that deepened as he approached. As he came into that open space all eyes were watchful against him, and there were still some inmates who pressed themselves against the far wall as he entered.

Jesse found Lasenex in a dimly lit office just off the main ward. Jesse knocked on the open door and the doctor leapt to his feet in greeting, shaking his hand and beckoning Jesse to sit in one of the tub chairs facing his desk.

Well, said Lasenex.
The victorious Mr Quinn.
Dare I ask if you slept well?
Jesse smiled broadly, with no need to answer.

Perhaps this is something, said Lasenex, that you have also brought back. Much like your wounds that do not fester or heal. You were roused out of eternal sleep, so perhaps sleep might be finished for you?

Jesse sighed and smiled at the old man.
Why is it, Dr Lasenex, that you only ever have bad news for me?

Lasenex shrugged in resignation and said: look around, Mr Quinn. This is what I do. I give people bad news, awful news. To patients, to families. Many do recover but I cannot retrieve them all. And what to say about the ones in my back wards…

I can retrieve them, Jesse said.
Lasenex looked at him in surprise.
But you have…
Failed. Before. I know.
And I don't mean all of them, said Jesse.
But there may be some I can redeem.

Lasenex looked uncertain for a moment, and while he was in that unaccustomed state Jesse did his best to explain, speaking out of the strange vision that had ripened within him after the events of the previous night.

Jesse told Lasenex that the light he wielded was a subsidiary power, subordinate to something greater than light and with the power to compel spirits. It was the enfleshment of these djinns, he said, that gave them their power, the possession of the earthly bodies of their victims. Jesse said that Light could not penetrate flesh but the Word was empowered to do so, and

that this could be seen from the action of ordinary words upon the ordinary motivation of men, let alone those specially ordained words with the power to move human hearts.

Jesse said that the choice of human beings was always the deciding factor, and that even those foolish enough to allow spirits to infest them need only reinstate their own dominion over their flesh for any spirit to be cast out. Leaving the victim sovereign again over the flesh bequeathed to them when they came into the world. Out of the tense commandment that souls should be free to direct their flesh in any manner they choose, although most souls do not have the courage to take up the freedom that is given to them.

Even the Word cannot compel them, Jesse said.
But it can restore them to their power.
It can set them free again, to choose.

Lasenex chafed gently at these final words. I have contended with you on this before, Mr Quinn. Such freedom, free choice, is very rarely seen.

And if they confirm their choice? Lasenex asked. If they choose to remain infested?

Then they are lost, said Jesse.
But rather than have us speculate.
If you would take me down to your back wards again.
One way or another, we will shortly find out.

Jesse followed Lasenex back through the hospital and Jesse's empty ward, then down the concrete stairwell that led to the back wards.

As Lasenex fumbled with his keys Jesse recalled his previous visits to these wards: the fear that was in him at those times, the failure he had always encountered. He saw with some surprise that his fear was now completely gone, and in its place he found a mixture of resolve and resignation. Jesse was beyond caring very much for his own safety, and with the power of the Word now surging within him he saw that any further confrontation with these prisoners would be blunt and definitive, whatever the result might be.

Lasenex was more conflicted. He felt various things including a strange and rippling feeling: not quite fear but something very close to fear, an unfamiliar mixture of hesitancy and awe.

When they reached the moving compartment Lasenex felt this strange uncertainty grow to the point where he paused for a moment, turning to Jesse with the thought that perhaps they should turn back.

You are sure, Mr Quinn?
Jesse nodded his head.
Is there any patient you would like to see first?
Jesse thought for a moment.
No, Doctor.
Any of them will do.
Perhaps you might take me to the youngest first.

My guess is that they might be easiest to reach.

And Doctor, said Jesse. I know you have your kill switch with you but I would ask you to use it sparingly, if you can. Some of these confrontations might get a little… intense. I accept the risk, if you don't stop them in time. I just need you to give me as much time as you can.

The compartment ground to a halt down at one far end of the back wards. Lasenex glanced worriedly at Jesse, reluctant to open the doors, but Jesse just furrowed his brow and gestured for him to do so.

The doors opened and the two men entered the cell.

On their previous visits inmates had always begun sly and passive but this new encounter was wildly different. The creature hissed savagely then leapt up on the bed, pressing itself against the corner of the room as it grimaced and snapped at Jesse.

Lasenex saw this behaviour and how it was provoked, and to some extent he also saw Jesse though the eyes of this wretch. He saw the release and refinement of the powers within his protégé, how they could terrify this creature who feared no living man. Lasenex released his hold on his kill switch, taking

his hand out of his trouser pocket as the creature tensed and snarled and muttered, while Jesse stood against it completely unconcerned.

Dr Lasenex.
Yes, Mr Quinn.
How old is this boy?
He is nineteen.
And what is his name?

Matthew.

This single word came from the creature that cowered and cursed in the corner of the room, spoken in the voice that the boy had been born with. A small voice weary and frightened as it came out towards them again.

My name is Matthew.

Jesse sat down on the edge of the bed, and without looking directly at the boy he said: Matthew. My name is Jesse. Will you sit with me?

The boy slowly detached himself from the wall and sat down next to Jesse, still hissing and jerking about.

As the two sat together Jesse saw how young Matthew really was, how small and frightened he seemed underneath all of his exterior aggression. Jesse was not sentimental about it, for he knew what outrages the boy had committed, but he also saw how these things had been counselled and procured by the djinn that infested him. Jesse also saw Matthew abused for his entire childhood, suffering cigarette burns and belt-marks and

much more unspeakable things, and how this had exposed the boy to djinns who had promised him protection, who had told him for the first time in his life that he was cherished, for the very first time that he was loved.

Matthew, said Jesse.
Can you hear me?
Yes, said the boy.
I need you to listen to me, Matthew.
OK.

As soon as the boy had said those words he twisted and cackled and his eyes began to glint again, as he resumed the strange imprecations that kept the dark spirit within him.

Matthew, said Jesse.
This thing that is inside of you.
I know it has promised you things.
But Matthew, you should listen to me.
This thing is lying to you.

Fuck You, said a guttural voice. And your lies, Deceiver. You know: We are to be Great. We are all that has been promised. Jealous as you are, lonely as you are. We will not be deceived by a Death-Cheat such as you.

Jesse kindled a small flame in his right hand.
Matthew.
Listen to me carefully.
This thing fears you. Not me.
Because it cannot hold you.
If you withdraw your consent, Matthew.
Whatever you say, it must do.

Matthew, said the djinn, in a soft, sing-song tone. You love Us, you have said that you do. You love our gifts, also. This man is but a False God, who would steal what We have given. Have We not always promised? Have We not always delivered?

Jesse.
The voice once again small, boyish, human.
Yes Matthew.
If He leaves me.
Will you kill Him?

Jesse paused for a moment.

No, Matthew.
I don't think he can be killed.
But I can send him to a place where he cannot reach you anymore.

Matthew! The voice now imperious, the voice of a false and brutal father. We command you: kill this impostor, who would slander us so! You know what disobedience will bring you. False Son, breaker of hearts, do not defy us!

Jesse and Lasenex waited silently for the boy to make his choice. Lasenex in ignorance and wonder, Jesse in clear sight of the Light that was returning to the boy. He had seen it flow back with the first words the boy had spoken in his ordinary human voice, and the rankling of the thing crouched within him had only caused more light to flow in. Jesse saw the shrieks of the djinn for the death-throes they really were, and although the spirit said further things Matthew spoke his own words more and more until the voice of the djinn was silenced.

With his stolen voice returned to him the boy trembled and then slumped forwards, his eyes starting to well with tears. As he wept the boy breathed out heavily, the tension in his body breaking to release his human feelings once again.

I am tired, he said
I want this to be over.
I want you to kill me Jesse.
Don't save me.
I don't deserve to live.

Jesse sat with the boy as he wept.
I cannot kill you, Jesse said.
You know that Matthew.
But I can restore you to that choice.

Choice? Matthew asked.
Choice, said Jesse.
The open door.
O it has called to me, said Matthew.

There was silence for a few moments, Jesse remaining very still with Matthew slumped beside him. Lasenex also stood completely still, hardly daring to breathe, and for some time all three were more like stones than men, all waiting upon the result of the boy's election.

Jesse, the boy said eventually.
I don't want Him anymore.
I want Him to be gone.

At these words the room began to shake violently, and Lasenex

shot his hand into his pocket to grab his kill switch. But there was no need for such crude means, and Lasenex held the switch in his increasingly slack hand as he watched a miracle unfold.

Up out of the boy there reared a ghastly vibrational presence, a pestilent cloud that sniggered and sneered as it rose out of the boy's body. This thing welled up against Jesse but he was unflinching, the Word within him encompassing this event completely. Jesse uttered words that condemned the djinn for its filthiness and duplicity, exposing the lack of any conviction in the thing that might give it independent existence.

Jesse spoke the words he was given to say to the djinn, saying at the conclusion of every stanza as a reminder to himself: steady now, steady.

The djinn saw the magic in Jesse's words, and seeing every escape blocked it made one last attempt to infest the boy again. But Matthew was now completely sealed against it, sobbing for his deliverance, his human tears sufficient to repulse the djinn and condemn it to the void places once more.

Jesse continued his low speech as he opened his right hand, releasing his blue light again. The djinn slobbered incoherently but it could not contend with this light, or with the leverage of Jesse's replenished soul. This debased thing was sewn with inferior cord, its parts all agnostic to one another, and the Word seared against its every seam and the thing was rendered into pieces. Its screeches faded as it fell into irreconcilable parts, consigned to the fragmentary darkness where it would not be unified again.

And it was done. Jesse closed his hand to quench his fire, and

Matthew mumbled some quiet words of relief before collapsing back on his bed and going into a deep sleep.

After waiting for a time Lasenex made some observations, checking the boy's pulse and shining a small light into his eyes. The old man then nodded to Jesse and they left the room quietly so as not to disturb Matthew's sleep, going back into the metal compartment to discuss what they should do next.

Shall we go back? asked Lasenex.
Jesse pursed his lips, unsure.
I don't know, he said.
What do you think?

It depends, Mr Quinn. After that confrontation I would not be surprised if you were exhausted. But if I were a betting man? I would wager that you are feeling stronger, not weaker.

It feels that way, said Jesse.
Shall we go on?

Lasenex nodded in agreement and then paused to think of his prisoners: the next youngest, the next most likely to be redeemed. The old man then selected a button from the control panel and they ground on towards the next cell without any further discussion.

CHAPTER 10

Even As The Silver Is Tried

THROUGH all of their adventures in the back wards Lasenex was very gracious towards Jesse, and he became increasingly deferential as Jesse's powers were proved.

Jesse felt uplifted by the old man's admiration but he understood that liberating these souls was only the first part of the work. He told Lasenex of the need confront those liberated in an ordinary human confrontation, to try them in respect of their future intentions and whether their repentance might endure.

Lasenex deferred to Jesse in this next phase of the work, offering him the use of his private office in order to consult with these patients. Jesse thanked him for that offer but asked instead to have one of the consulting rooms: a few chairs, a plastic coffee table, perhaps a duress alarm if Lasenex would provide one. Jesse also invited the doctor to sit in with him, so that he could see for himself what might be proved of these patients. Lasenex eagerly accepted this offer even though the role of observer was unfamiliar to him, and the two men moved briskly through the list of patients that Jesse had redeemed.

Let us take one example.

Jesse sits quietly as a young man is shown into the room. Lasenex sits quietly also. The young man looks around skittishly, as though he might try to run, until Jesse says to him very quietly: Seth.

It's OK.
We're just going to have a chat.
Why don't you sit down?

The young man sits down facing Jesse, and although he tries to posture Jesse sees his hands feather anxiously around the edges of his chair. He sees the shame and the fear in the young eyes that will not meet his for more than a second, the colour rising in the boy's face as Jesse waits for a few moments before beginning to speak.

Seth.
I'm going to ask you a few questions.
OK, says the boy.
You know what you have done.
Yes. Sir.
You know these are terrible things.
Yes Sir.
And do you repent from them?
I don't know, Sir.

Jesse looks at the boy, puzzled.

You don't know whether you repent?
No Sir, said Seth.
I don't know you are asking.

I don't know what repent means.

Jesse found himself again and again with these young inmates who were ignorant of the basic syntax of conscience, let alone what might be required of them if they wished to retrieve their souls.

Even the grammar of admission seemed foreign to these boys. They would seek to excuse themselves for what they had done, trying to shift the blame, and when that effort failed they would spit out the words *I'm sorry, OK?* In the nasty tone used by reprobates who don't feel sorry at all.

Jesse would get under these assertions and say you are not sorry, and these boys would twist and fence until they abruptly changed their tone, beginning to tremble instead, and more than one of them would say as their hearts were broken open: I don't know what you want from me. For what I have done, there are no words that will do.

Jesse would explain patiently that every crime can be expiated if the price will be paid, that every soul can be redeemed no matter how grievous its sin. Jesse described what it was to repent, assuring these boys that unless they changed their ways their remorse would count for nothing, and in fact would just further condemn them.

Jesse also spoke the hard truths of atonement: what must be

given to set the ledger straight, the hardship inherent in this and the role that suffering always plays. He told each penitent that they might be required to face death and do so willingly, describing how that willingness in particular can bring hearts back into an immediate state of grace. This fast path to redemption of which all our stories speak.

Jesse tells these things to Seth before he questions him again, the young man brightening with every word he hears about the power of the human conscience, the genuine Good News with its infinite power to redeem.

Eventually Jesse puts the boy to his election.
I'm going to ask you once more, Jesse says.
Do you repent?
Yes Sir.
And will you atone?
Yes Sir.
To what extent?
Sir?
In atonement, Seth. How far will you go?
To death, sir.
You mean that?
Yes Sir. You can have my life now if you want it.

Saying this Seth holds his hands out towards Jesse, his wrists

proffered upwards in the immediate submission of his life. Jesse sees the scars that tell of a life already forfeit, nodding just as Lasenex nods to see the instant redemption of this boy, who does not fear suffering, who will travel that path willingly despite the dangers on every side, without a thought for his own safety because his life is already given.

Each of these interviews differed, and yet each one went down in substantially the same way. Jesse would put the penitent to a full inventory of their offending, and then describe these things back so these wretches might examine their conscience in the full light of their wrongdoing.

Some candidates were unwilling to participate in this examen, but for each one who refused there but there were a dozen more who gladly submitted to it. To these there would always come tears, brimming but held back, and as Jesse absolved each one of the need to be stoic they would collapse in tears, holding out their hands in mute appeal against the horrors they had committed.

Each penitent who broke down would immediately declare their life to be forfeit, and beg Jesse to light up his fire and take their lives away. They knew that death was the one thing that could match the gravity of their offending, but no man is warranted to dole death even to the worst offender and Jesse

would tell these penitents so.

I cannot give you what you ask, Jesse would say.
But I can offer you the chance at a good death.
To die well in the service of other people.

Jesse would make that offer to see it gladly taken up, as inchoate and formidable as it was, but before he accepted a pledge from any penitent he would issue the same stern warning.

I will only tell you this once, Jesse would say. If you are not sincere, if you betray your vows? The Sisters will deal with you. You beg for death now but death is nothing compared to what they will take from you.

So if you doubt your repentance.
And your willingness to atone?
Then tell me now, for your own sake.
Confess to me before the Sisters find you out.

In his proving of souls Jesse was very methodical, working carefully thorough the list of names held by Lasenex, grateful to the nurses who would present each candidate to him and then wait just outside the doors.

Most of the souls tried by Jesse were quick to confirm their redemption, but there remained those who felt cheated out of their former power, reviling Jesse as deceiver and thief of their previous inheritance. These wretches sat hunched before Jesse, whispering and nodding to themselves, their arms clutching at their bodies as they rocked back and forth in lament for what had gone out of them.

Jesse would speak the same words about repentance, about what it was to atone, speaking these truths exactly as the regretful railed against him. Jesse would describe the election that was required and the consequences of that election, but these recidivists merely snarled at him, their mouths pulled back to bare teeth by their spasming facial muscles.

Saying: Deceiver, I was warned about you. I was told not to listen. Give me back what you have stolen! Violator, rapist! I was weak and you took Her from me. I want Her back. Not this filth you have to trade, I want Her back!

To such patients Jesse would always put the question three times, asking whether they would repent, escalating the terms each time by describing more vividly the consequences of refusal.

These things were offered to every patient but the greedy and double-hearted would never assent to them. They spat their words of refusal and accusation at Jesse, likening him to Judas who had once robbed them of their prize. They would hiss and deny Jesse and say: do not tempt me, you son of a whore, I do not accede to your terms.

The first time he faced such a refusal Jesse sighed heavily. After

three offers and three denials, intensifying his demands with each attempt, Jesse fell silent and thought for a moment about what he ought to do.

Lasenex was about to suggest something when Jesse spoke.

Shackle him.
Lasenex momentarily uncertain.
I beg your pardon Mr Quinn I…

Shackle him, said Jesse.
With whatever you have.
The sisters will deal with him.
But Mr Quinn…

Doctor Lasenex, Jesse said. I must ask for your trust on this one. This man will not be redeemed. I have asked him three times, and three times he has denied me. I could ask him a thousand times and his answer would be the same.

So I would ask you to restrain him.
Wherever you think fit.
The Sisters will deal with him.
There's nothing more we can do.

Lasenex was not used to taking orders, but after a brief moment of hesitation he leapt to his feet, leaving the room briefly before returning with four male nurses, their faces blank and impassive.

As the wretch was lifted and carried away he began spitting and cursing, saying: Madman, Murderer! Give me back what you have stolen! Murderer! Thief! My Angel will find me!

The wretch screeched these things and worse as the nurses took him away. As if to demarcate the strict limits of redemption, and the gates through which it shall pass, with no man predictable until he is put to his election, and no man judged until those gates shall beckon him through.

The final candidate was a tall woman with some nondescript name, one of the few women who were imprisoned in Lasenex's back wards. Condemned out of her grievous offending, her taste for every type of amphetamine and her secret, unspeakable cruelty.

She sat facing Jesse in her pale, sun-damaged skin, her eyes lacking any human warmth, her yellowed teeth protruding from a mouth that was set too far forwards, her chin receding into the ropy muscles of her neck.

Lasenex had been called away and so Jesse confronted the woman alone. He went to address her by name but he hesitated in a moment of violent repulsion, as she smiled her grim smile and swayed her head from side to side. There was something reptilian about her, with her dead eyes and her fingers curled up like claws, exuding some force sick and treacherous that caused Jesse's skin to crawl. He cleared his throat a couple of times but he found no words to say to this creature in her swaying, hypnotic silence.

As Jesse steadied himself the woman began to moan, amidst a strange clicking and whistling that sounded more insect than human. Although her voice was distorted her song had clearly discernible lyrics, saying:

Drums, the Drums.
I hear His Drums.
The Fish God rises for the drums, He Comes!
To fulfil His vow to His faithful ones.

The woman fell silent and Jesse went to speak but a mute horror had been instilled in him by this dirge, slimy and corrupt as it emerged from the woman's mouth, seeking to worm itself into Jesse's chest as well as his ears. Before he could recover himself she began to sing again.

He shall drown the land, and all its kin, the seas will drink as your blood flows in! The blood of the Lamb, made drink for the damned. The Monstrous One, He Comes! He Comes!

Jesse sank back in his chair, overcome by rising nausea. The escalating horrors coming out of the woman swaying in front of him, her eyes now glittering like the skin of an insect king. She lurched and began to chant again but this time her language was not human, it was some guttural speech belonging to the diseases of memory, the chittering of scaled creatures long extinguished from the world.

The chanting grew louder and more dreadful and then it stopped abruptly, with the woman looking at Jesse with unnatural desire in her eyes, mixed with an awful, child-like terror.

He Comes!
The Fallen One!
He Comes!

At these words the woman's eyes and mouth snapped closed and her head was drawn upwards into a regal bearing. Her face remained passive as her neck began to extend further upwards in a popping, grinding distension of cartilage and sinew. Her neck stretched until she sat impossibly tall and erect, then without warning her head smashed down against her right shoulder, rupturing the opposite side of her neck in a riot of viscera and a gushing fountain of blood.

With her neck shattered and her spinal cord severed the woman slid lifeless to the floor, in a growing slick of blood, her eyes open again but devoid of any expression, looking upon life and death with indifference through her already glazing eyes.

Jesse gaped in horror for many moments, a fine spray of blood on his clothes and face as he stared at the corpse crumpled before him. Thinking to speak but without the voice to do so, thinking to run but unable to move or to cry out -

BOOK V
(5 Lupa)

CHAPTER 11

Mizpah

IN all of his endeavours Carlos Lasenex was an extraordinarily careful man. He was always immaculately presented, his suits pressed and his shirts starched, every hair on his head assigned to its proper place.

Lasenex had no interest in the mindless flitting of fashion but the strange antiquity about his clothing only cemented the general impression: that this was another kind of man, belonging to another era, when decency and charity were the expected features of men, along with a life freely given to work that was mostly thankless, mostly unrewarded.

Most claims to celibacy arise from fear and self-deception, the damage done to certain men by certain mothers, but there are those genuinely called to this state and Carlos Lasenex was the first amongst them. His work was too important to risk any distraction or division of his loyalties, so that even a little allowed to his own desires might thwart the fulfilment of his mission.

Like all celibates Lasenex suffered from the pangs of loneliness, but keeping his own company was usually enough for him. He

suffered more for the lack of physical comfort, the want of humane affection and intimate human touch that was written in tense lines about his body. But he was accepting even of these restraints and he moved bravely through their limits, keeping his own counsel and enjoying the other consolations that his faith brought to him.

When angst did infringe upon the doctor he would pause and let those feeling grow in him, pausing for long enough to feel them drain away as well. He would take stock of his present condition and re-order the things around him, and he would reflect upon his many blessings and the satisfactions of the tasks he was charged with. Although his relief was never absolute these efforts would soften his harder feelings, allowing him the courage to continue, even though the yearning within him was never completely assuaged.

Carlos Lasenex was a busy man, always fully absorbed in the work he was given to do. He oversaw the ebb and flow of patients presenting at the hospital, viewing such flows through his various lenses, his inherent human sight and his trained professional eye, the more secret ways of seeing that may not be openly discussed.

The old man knew the various forces acting upon his patients, the phases of the moon but also more mundane phases.

Religious holidays that might seem arcanely significant but which simply subjected people to increases of ordinary stress, the Christmas rush and the Easter flow presenting Lasenex with more patients and more work than at calmer times of the year.

Carlos expected patient numbers to fluctuate but he had become increasingly concerned at the recent spike in presentations. He was also unable to account for the severity of those presentations, although tracing the figures back had shown him that the surge began at the exact time that Jesse had died and then been redeemed out of hell.

After him, the deluge. Middle-aged men with perfect mental health suddenly decompensating into psychosis, with no precipitant at all, presenting with florid religious delusions that could not be explained in terms of their interests or upbringing. Younger men more prone these things but not in such numbers, without any drug abuse or other catalyst that could explain their descent into insanity.

Carlos pored over his notes and his statistical manuals but he could find no explanation for this recent surge. He watched without comprehending as presentations became more bizarre: the sudden eruptions of fixed religious mania, religious terrors coming upon people without prodrome or accompanying functional decline.

More and more he saw patients suffering merely from an overwhelming fearfulness which they could not explain. Strong men found crouching in basements and roof-spaces, shuddering in wordless terror with the rest of their sanity intact. Lasenex also noticed that the usual stream of drug-induced psychosis had completely dried up, as though the use

of methamphetamine and alcohol had somehow become protective against the onset of illness, rather than the violent provocateur of psychosis they had previously been.

Most disturbing of all was the self-harm. Lasenex had never seen such horror, actions so violent and grotesque they were suggestive of some external force acting upon the victim. The wretch who had had died in front of Jesse was not the worst of these. People were found with blunt-force trauma suggesting an attack from some unimaginable beast, catastrophic injuries self-inflicted by people with no conceivable means of doing so. Men dying after pulling their own hearts clear of their chests, women rupturing their lumbar spines by jerking forwards out of a standing position, literally snapping themselves in two.

Carlos looked for the known signs of Lupa in these injuries but there were no signs of the She-Wolves at all. He knew very well that Lupa worked mostly within exterior spaces, executing judgment within metaphoric space and not upon the literal flesh of their victims. These were sheer physicalities that Lupa had no way of inflicting.

All of these things combined to suggest some monstrous external force, lately risen into the world, and Lasenex was learned enough in scripture and mythology to shudder very deeply when he considered what this thing might be. Out of whole universes imagined by tortured writers, fiction that was much closer than anyone would believe to the utmost horror of reality. And what lurked in those inhuman universes, ghastly enough to convince Lasenex that he must take drastic action to find out what he could about this Thing lately come into the world.

The doctor was a solitary man but there was profound company available to him, a source of solace and instruction that rare men are enabled to access, men with the receptivity and the merit to connect with the help that seeks them.

This help would come to Lasenex any time he was humble, any time he faltered and admitted that he could not penetrate a mystery alone. Lasenex would bow his head in full confession of his need, holding the problem within his heart as he asked to be given wisdom, the answer reaching out towards him the instant he submitted in prayer.

The night soon came when Lasenex was given his answer. He felt the familiar static, the growing presence of the Friend, smiling as that presence came closer to him and he heard the familiar words of greeting. The Friend greeting him as *sheikh* and as *mullah*, calling him old one, wise one, in the full tradition and honour of that address. The Friend wishing him *salaam* and bestowing a host of other blessings as the evening deepened and stilled.

As the evening slowed Carlos communed quietly with the Friend. There were elaborate courtesies to discharge, the praiseful names they had for one another requiring recitation, and if these sounded like incantations or the weaving of spells they were in fact far more subtle and reverent than that. Lasenex giving thanks to the Friend for His presence in his hour of need, the Friend observing His own requirement to call that gratitude unnecessary.

In the elegance of these courtesies there were secrets imparted, as the formal parts of the evening gave way to pressing matters. Lasenex spoke of the signs and wonders he had seen and the Friend had also seen these signs. Lasenex and the Friend described these portents to one other, the events within the hospital and also in wider places, recounting the sudden failure of crops, the huge increases in road deaths and infanticide and workplace fatalities. Good business relationships abruptly descending into violence, families who had enjoyed years of peace suddenly turning on each other, inflicting wounds emotional and physical that were as savage as they were unexpected.

As Lasenex spoke the Friend also consulted with His other sources, testing what Lasenex was relating to Him against those stores of knowledge. Every store and source agreed that while this might be something new, it was much more likely to be some ancient, pestilent thing: a beast long dormant, classed with all primordial things that chafe in their prisons or roam the void places, assuming false names to delude the faithful into worship.

Lasenex and the Friend considered how such a thing could have been released, and what this might mean for the lines of justice and decency that stretch so tenuously across the hearts of humankind. They also speculated about how such a thing might be confronted, without any particulars of what it was or how it had emerged or even what its names might be.

The Friend eventually broke from these speculations, seeing only fear and uncertainty rise from them, and not the knowledge that both of them urgently sought. In the resulting

silence Lasenex knew what the Friend was going to ask, but although he knew it was the only path his heart rebelled against it.

No, said Lasenex.
Yes, *Sheikh*.
You must use his gifts.
His second sight.
There is no other way.

Lasenex was deferential to the Friend but he begged desperately against this suggestion. He acknowledged Jesse's recent victories but also pleaded Jesse's youth, his fragility, his struggles with himself and the parlous state of his soul.

He is vulnerable, said Lasenex. He is brave and he shines but he is still no more than a boy. His enemies lie in wait, for the smallest chance. How can I expose him to horrors of which we can scarcely speak?

The Friend acknowledged these concerns but He also reminded Lasenex of the scale of the present danger, what might be in store for Jesse and for everyone else should the prophecies prove to be true. Lasenex deferred to the Friend and praised His constant wisdom, but with the greatest respect he continued to ask for Jesse to be spared, or at least be granted some time before being called on to show his face.

Carlos and the Friend agonised over their decision. They made further enquiries wherever they knew to look, consulting canonical texts and the oracular records that persist in the background signature of the universe. Possibilities were suggested and then hunted down, possibilities that did not

provide any answer. Carlos searched for some means that might flush out the creature without exposing Jesse, but none of his searches revealed anything useful at all.

As time wore on the Friend became insistent.
We have no time, *Sheikh*.
We have come to a tipping point.
You must look through him.
You must use his sight.

The night deepened and the portals of the evening slowly closed down, leaving less and less of the Friend's presence in the room. The Friend and the whole world sinking back into the darkness, but before He faded to a point where communication became impossible the Friend repeated his exhortation.

You must look, *Sheikh*.
Lasenex nodding his head sadly.
Whatever the risk.
You must look.

The night slipped between the old man and the solace of the Friend, leaving Lasenex with his fears for Jesse but also the familiar feeling of loss, the loneliness felt by those who must commune with the dead because those who are left living are no longer enough.

CHAPTER 12

CARLOS Lasenex sat quietly in his garden cottage, drinking coffee and cold water and preparing himself for the task at hand.

Although he had anguished with the Friend he had known that this work was inevitable, even with the danger that it posed to Jesse. Lasenex knew that his own soul would also be badly endangered but he was no stranger to risk, and he remained completely unconcerned for his own welfare. His only prayers were for Jesse as the night welled and deepened, the doctor anxious for the proper time to come.

As the night approached its zenith Lasenex left his cottage and made his way through the darkness to the main hospital building. He entered and nodded to the few staff working the graveyard shift, with their observation charts and tepid cups of tea. They nodded back to him without any special interest, for they often saw the doctor working very late or very early, walking his rounds that seemed just as pressing to him in the night as in the daytime.

Lasenex walked briskly towards the empty ward where Jesse wrestled with sleep. As he entered the doctor closed the doors to the ward behind him, pulling them together so that the locks slotted back into place, arming those same locks by means of a small plastic card he pressed against the lock-facing.

Lasenex went over to a wall-mounted switchboard and snapped the plastic cover open. He flipped a switch that was set up to look like a residual current device, but that was for camouflage only and did not indicate the true purpose of the switch.

Lasenex closed the cover of the switchboard and then made his way over to the darkest corner of the room, where he sat down on a plastic chair and waited for the cold to come.

Lasenex sits with infinite patience in the cooling ward. The secret refrigeration unit working overtime until his breath smokes visibly out of his mouth. The same mist that settles under the mountains where he was born, the other mountains where he was taken to be trained. The cool Breath of God that cups the peaks and ushers the night in, blanketing and comforting the sleeping people, replacing their memories with dreams so they can recover the strength to press on.

Eventually the cold in the room reached its quickening point, bringing forth the perfect conditions for conduction. Lasenex felt the slick channels chill down and cement themselves, and when they were solidly formed he reached out towards Jesse as gently as he could.

Lasenex took Jesse and brought him down into a cool insensate condition that was very much like sleep. The old man then shifted his own vision so that he shared Jesse's dream sight, gradually dislodging Jesse from that place so that Lasenex looked out alone. The old man subsumed in Jesse's vision until he was no longer cognizant of his separate self, his own body emptied of consciousness as he took up the reins of Jesse's soul.

In Jesse's borrowed voice Carlos began to recite a long poem, or rather prose with various features of poetry, the stark metre and strange run-on rhythms of poetic and scriptural speech. Words that spoke of the light of the mind, the only light that can prevail against the darkness, and the illumination in the presence of fear that is called the courage of men.

Jesse was lulled by this speech and his breath slowed down, as Lasenex caused him to sink ever further out of himself. That process reached finality and Carlos gasped and arched his back, his eyes rolling backwards in his head as he was transported wholly into the landscape of Jesse's dreams.

Lasenex steadied himself and then opened his eyes in that space. He was initially dismayed by the breadth of Jesse's vision, to see the earth yaw and thunder from every angle as it rolled on impervious to human concepts of night or day.

Lasenex saw the dry land and he saw the prodigious depths, the blue waters seething and foaming, and under them the deepest gouges out of the planetary surface. Lasenex felt himself dragged unwillingly from the land toward the sea, then plunged deeper and deeper as the green-blue shallows turned to black, and beyond them the dense waters, the crushing gloom.

At one profound limit of the deep Lasenex was shown a huge gravitational anomaly, a cave hollowed out by forces secret to the depths, built up by streams of convective chemical energy flowing out of the heart of the planet. Lasenex saw the walls of this cave scratched with marks of madness, huge smears of cosmic depravity that caused his skin to crawl. The carvings of an insane prisoner interred for millions of years, delighting to think of its release and the commission of its crimes to come.

With a sudden sickening realisation Lasenex saw that he was looking at an empty prison, an empty grave. Despite his fear the old man shifted his vision out of the cave towards the trail left by the fleeing prisoner, a trail fecal and disgusting and unholy, the vile leavings of a creature now freed to go lumbering and shrieking towards the land.

Lasenex saw the trail rise up out of the depths of the ocean trench, seeing it become fresher and fresher as it rose towards the light. He would have followed this trail all the way to confront the beast but that would have been a death sentence for Jesse, and in any event Lasenex already knew what it was that he followed, from its marks and its leavings, from prophecy foretelling the havoc it would wreak upon the world.

For this was Chixulub. This prurient God, the God of Pestilence,

this Thing of the Void Places. The Unholy, The Unredeemed. Among its many names. Lasenex was instructed in the legends of its fall but he had hoped that these were false legends, hallucinated by some poet in the grip of a laudanum withdrawal, a remorseless psychotic spiral conjuring sick and impossible things. And the legends which spoke of its slumber, so long after its Fall, the predictions that the beast might awaken from its sleep to march against the world.

This was Chixulub. Who fell to earth, plunging the world into darkness. Who had limped and crawled to the great depths to repair the insults of its Fall, who slumbers in the deep ocean dreaming of the land. Who despises the upright creatures that walk there, in the arrogance of their speech especially, who imagine their gods to be benevolent as the Scaled God waits for His time to come.

Lasenex had seen enough, but as he tried to quit Jesse's dream-vision it shifted and clamped down on him. Lasenex found himself standing on a chalk cliff looking out over the ocean, and as he stood there he saw a beast rise up out of the waters. It seemed to have many heads and many horns, and upon those horns were festooned many crowns, and upon each forehead of the beast was inscribed the word: Blasphemy.

Lasenex groaned and tried to wrestle his mind out of Jesse's dreams but they grasped a tighter hold on him. He was brought down to the depths again, and he looked upwards to see the vast bodies and souls of the ones who rolled and sang in the upper parts of the ocean, they who had sickened of the land and gone into the seas once more. Lasenex saw into the minds of these beings, saw their powers and what they were able to transmit, and he saw these powers usurped by the Abomination

who now controlled and amplified them to its own disgraceful ends.

Amongst so many unspeakable things Lasenex struggled for the words to comprehend this aspect of the disaster.

Fifteen pounds of brain?
Used only for swimming?
It cannot be…

Oh my God.

Lasenex was then shown these crimes in absolute clarity. He saw the great whales in their customary role, using their powers to transmit comfort and protection to the people of the world, especially the faithful and the broken-hearted who cried out for such protection. He saw the same whales now used by this monster, used to scatter insanity and violence amongst the people. He saw millions of silver threads spinning out into the world to conduct this depravity, and he saw millions more spun in preparation for the wholesale insanity of the vulnerable peoples of the Earth. So they would lay down palms for the Fish God when he arose out of the depths, so they would hail Chixulub with hosannas and acclaim him as their King.

As he looked about in horror Lasenex felt the Abomination turn its attention towards him. He made a final desperate effort to break out of Jesse's vision but he was held there by the Beast, and with a thousand lidless eyes the creature stared at him and shrilled. Lasenex knew he was looking death in the face, and he felt death coming to claim him as the creature swelled against him with a hideous roar, and what came next for Lasenex was terror and then: darkness.

Dr Lasenex.

The doctor lost to the darkness, even as Jesse shook him.

Dr Lasenex.
Are you OK?

Lasenex opened his eyes and looked around in confusion. As he came back to himself he gulped in the sharp air, unsure of how he had escaped the death that had seemed certain to claim him. Jesse looked around the ward in matching confusion, his breath steaming, his fingers turning blue in the cold.

What has happened to the room? Jesse asked.

Lasenex gradually recovered to the point where he could get up out of his chair, limping over to the switchboard and flipping the switch to the cooling circuit. He felt the compensatory rush of warm air flood into the room without any of his usual relief.

Lasenex turned and looked at Jesse, and although the old man had intended to speak he saw that Jesse had notice of everything he might have said. The same things that the old man had seen with Jesse's stolen sight, the same abject horror. And Jesse saw things that were hidden from Lasenex, including the sure shadow of death than now shrouded the old man, although Lasenex saw some of that shadow reflected in Jesse's face.

The two men stared wordlessly at each other across that grim divide.

CHAPTER 13

Argonauts
(The Slaughter of the Innocents)

NOW come the grave preparations, the urgent meeting of minds. The Friend reaching out to his other familiars who come to the Old Man with help, with offers of fighting men -

The preparations made in secret and so the numbers must be small, the technology absent. Fighting fleets with scant freeboard, their gunwales sunk down to the sea -

The Fish God sees the preparations and so He calms the sea. He sends machine noise against mariners so they can use no diesel, just as they are without sails -

So they go down to the sea in boats, roughly provisioned with oars -

The Old Man addresses them as they hang upon his words, the Argonauts going seaward and being blessed by the Old Man, saluting them with praiseful words, saying -

What, my shining sons of men? What hearts and minds, what arms sinewed in steel? What fortune that it should fall to me, to

have this honour to command you -

The Old Man speaks further to the men, saying: the Fish God said He would make His disciples into fishers of men, and His minions have sharpened their hooks and taken us one by one -

The earth heating up as the seas begin to rise, the polar regions melting so the earth shall again become a sea. The Scaled God who longs to flood the world, to master the insolent race of Men -

And if a soul is to know itself, he said, it must look into its own soul. Just as you were strangers in Babylon, so you know the soul of the stranger -

The Old Man falls silent, and with his blessing the men set out under the cover of darkness, under the stars of the night sky, the dark sea beneath them also teeming with stars -

The Argonauts rejoice to be joined by other companions, the sea-wolves joining and renewing the blood compact between whalers and the killers of whales. The ties that bind their ever-reciprocating souls –

In honour of this covenant the men have no percussive weapons. They bear only the shafts of ancient harpoons, sharpening the rusted steel and dressing it with wolfsbane -

To avert their hearts from Chixulub their clothing is fleeced with gold. To shield their minds they make helmets out of the glowing metal, coins and rings hammered into sheets that they splay across their foreheads -

And in such finery they descend like a horde of flaming angels, coming down out of the high places to contend with the Beast that was cast down -

They were brave, the companions, they bore up bravely against the sun and the rain and frost, enduring sleet and sea-ice and the maddening heat of the tropics -

Their eyes reddened with the salt water, their oars streaming with the endless brine. Their hands bound up with cloth that is immediately wet by the sea, drying to salt sheets that scrape their bloodied skin -

The Beast has no imagination equal to the courage of men so the innocents are not concealed. They are hidden in in plain sight as they have always been, rolling towards the land to better achieve His purpose -

The companions could not draw out Leviathan with a hook, or draw his tongue with any cord that could be sent down. Instead they raised themselves up in the prow and they drove their harpoons in, nailing the Dragon down to earth with each lance -

They learned to implore the great fish to come and be caught, to be of great courage and to fear nothing. They cried out that their death would be to serve, that all memory and honour would be given to those who would give of themselves -

The men promising that their bones would not be burnt, so that the soul of the slain might in latter days reclaim those bones. And lest their frames be broken no dog would be allowed gnaw on their bones -

There was made each time one man to be husband to the slain, so that the bereaved man might cry out to all such creatures, to warn them of the fate that was upon them if they did not amend their ways -

And some of these bereaved were so overcome with the slaughter that they went to sacrifice themselves as soon as the whale was killed, with such conviction that they would have been lost had they not been restrained -

And without pleasure they broke the head of Leviathan into pieces. They pierced his side and they drained out his waters, they gave of him as meat to the wolves that roam the sea -

In the slaughter their arms became leaden, their hands torn from the wood of their oars and their weapons. Their voices broken from their cries to each other, crying Hold! And Hold Fast!

And with these cries their hearts held, their hearts remained true to one another and to the task they had been set, as the waters churned and their spirits trembled to fight the ancient foe -

There was a terrible cost amongst the companions, in the flimsy boats they rode, with their rough and tentative weaponry and no proper footing amongst their prey -

They were dashed against sands and shallow reefs, their napes smashed by the mighty tails, the bulk of Leviathan crushing craft and men in a ferocious threshing upon the sea -

With rudders torn and keels ripped away, oars splintered and

thrust back through chests, men pierced by the jagged splints that would bear their souls away -

So that those who remained living were caused to envy the dead, their eyes raw with sorrow, hoping death would come for them also, having begged for the chance at such a death -

They should be remembered, in the dawn and at the going down of the sun, these unknown mariners who gave of themselves for the sake of we who remain -

They should be remembered, under night skies filled with stars, the massed Pleiades and Orion turning soundlessly above the living as they turned above the dead, shining above the night sea that is also full of stars -

No one remembers them. Justice.

CHAPTER 14

In Aquitaine

IN the place where he languished Jesse did not see these confrontations but his heart was heavy with them, weighed down especially by the dangers they posed to Lasenex.

Jesse had said a bright farewell to the old man, shaking his hand as warmly as he could, saying things he did not believe in order to shore up his courage. He knew that Lasenex was bound to this fight by the tenons securing his destiny, and Jesse had no wish to unsettle him or cause him more fear than was necessary.

Lasenex was terse in his own reply, casting his eyes downwards. Having neglected no aspect of his preparations, knowing how scant were his chances.

The two men spoke but they did not embrace. They shook hands and parted with grave words, like strangers to be parted from one other, like men who no longer share a common destiny although their pasts might be deeply entwined. One going out to the battle that he had been born to, the other left behind without hope of seeing his friend again.

With Lasenex gone Jesse found himself stretched out once more against the blankness of open time. The work to be done in the hospital was finished, with the redeemed now gone to fight under Lasenex, the Unforgiven still shackled in their place and with them poor Jesse James.

Jesse shifted and chafed against time. He fretted about things unfolding in the world outside of his knowledge, he feared for Lasenex and prayed for his protection. He was at times moved to contact Ruby, if she would speak to him again, but he knew that he was constrained from doing so while the battle lay unfought, that he was bound to focus upon the fortunes of that battle even from so far away.

Jesse hoped and prayed and as days wore into weeks he only intensified his prayers. He began to pray as he had when he was a boy, kneeling down on the hard concrete floor, begging for intercession from the bottom of his heart. He cried out for the welfare of the Argonauts and the old man who led them, pleading for those men he had liberated and the promises he had made. And although Jesse could not say to whom he made these supplications, the fruits of prayer came to him nonetheless.

One night as he knelt Jesse felt himself quietened. He listened intently in the darkness with a sense that a voice would speak to him, if he would make sufficient space within him. Jesse fell silent and in the quiet spaces of his heart he heard a question

put to him, asking whether he would know more about the gifts he had been given, how they might be joined with the purpose of his prayers. Jesse assented to this immediately, and in so doing he was opened to the secret sight that lay within him, the same sight Lasenex had commandeered that night on the freezing ward.

As Jesse looked with his new sight he saw things that confounded him, dismayed him. He saw that it was his own redemption that had loosed the monster from its prison, the earth shaking at the sound of his fall. And even harder truths: Lasenex and his men gone out as decoy in this confrontation, theirs being a subsidiary role in the battle that was to be waged. And Jesse saw who was in fact destined to engage the beast directly, who must rise to battle if the Fish God were to be defeated.

A voice within Jesse called his attention away from these things, and he heard himself asked a stern question in that voice which cries out to all. Who will confront the Great Serpent? Who has such courage within him? Jesse immediately responded that he was willing to fight, although he had no weapons or any knowledge of how he might prevail. But such courage is means in itself, and Jesse knew that he would find his weapons prepared and sharpened for him when he strode on to the field of battle.

As Jesse bent to this burden he was released into the knowledge of many further things. He saw that his skills to fight had been awoken by Lasenex as he conducted his researches in the freezing ward, breaking Jesse's gifts from their restraints and training them upon their target. Jesse saw that his weaponry was one with the Word that resounded within him, the Word

that is adaptable to every purpose including the waging of war. The Word that Was before any God could be, because only out of words can any God be made.

Jesse was gladdened by these things but he felt mostly glad to be in motion, having languished for so long, feeling the relief that flows into men after their launch into resolute action, despite the dreadful consequences that such action might bring.

Jesse closed his eyes and felt his way downwards, following the light of the leading Word to the source where it opened out within him. He began to hum and rattle and moan and still he followed that light downwards. He sank his attention past the Word as Light and he saw another Light that was called Power, a firelight teeming like a dark sea that would have terrified Jesse had he retained any exteriority to it at all.

Jesse continued to rumble and chant and he saw his blue light move against implacable darkness, and also the strange radiant fire that would not speak to him of its origin. He saw that He who is blessed to command such lights could by their power divide the darkness, by the innate power of such elements to illuminate differing things, to show them up in their true reflection and set them one against the other.

These powers built like a cyclone turning in the centre of Jesse's soul, a maelstrom that could shift and turn the vast weight of the oceans. All of it building and turning within Jesse, waiting for the right moment to come, waiting for the Fish God to turn and join in fierce and unequal combat to decide the future of the world.

CHAPTER 15

The Fisher King

OUT in the world of deep water and dark rock the Abomination was halted. It was filled with a feeling of approaching danger, although in such creatures the instinct for these things is dulled by their innate lust for destruction, their own death being just as satisfying as any other death.

The monster felt itself pressed against by a slight searing flow, the first touch of the power that was building within Jesse. The monster slowly turned as it identified the source of this flow, in a great lumbering gyration that showed Jesse the nexus between himself and what turned, the axle joining their two poles together although they were such poles apart.

As it turned to face Jesse the Fish God saw his human frailty, the same weakness that impaired its own disciples and caused them to bow down. Chixulub also saw Jesse tremble in the face of its vast bulk, feeling its customary contempt for men and the fear common to all of them, especially their fear of death which the monster did not comprehend.

Chixulub would have struck blows against Jesse immediately but it lusted after his pitiful humanity, how he might be

enslaved and turned against himself, the slow violence that was much more delightful to this creature than the bringing of quick death.

And so the beast began to warble in subtle tones, and in a song without words it called to Jesse as ally, as brother, as a chosen and cherished son. The beast sought an alliance with Jesse, a promise that would see them rise in victory over the world, subduing all temporal powers to a new spiritual kingdom. Replacing every corrupt power with Jesse's own will to power, the better knowledge of justice that was within his superior soul.

Jesse felt himself drawn by this temptation, towards imposing what is good for people over what their own freedom would decide. The better knowledge of what the monster sang to as Jesse's Heart of Greatness, his Light far superior to the lesser light of liberty, going out to corral every person before their lives could go astray.

These temptations called to Jesse but he was not incited by them, at least not in his deep heart where the decision over these things lay. The compassion within Jesse was actual compassion, going out towards individual people and their simple needs, it was not the bloated imitation of love that goes out of broken souls to seek power over multitudes. Jesse resisted these seductions and the monster saw him do it, and thwarted in this way it rolled back upon itself, sullenly daring this man to try what he would against it.

Jesse stared out over undifferentiated space, still orienting himself to the battlefield as it rolled and shimmered before him, and likewise the image of the beast.

As Jesse looked he realised that the space before him was dream-space, available to his conscious mind now that sleep had abandoned him. He saw that in turning to face him the monster had lumbered into the landscape of Jesse's own dreams, where Jesse alone was sovereign, free to resolve that space in any manner he might choose. Jesse's heart leapt to see Chixulub's error, this creature that did not sleep and could not dream, even if it had been imagined to do so as it lay inert in its underwater prison.

Jesse's hope increased as he tested his powers in that space. He dredged up scenes from history and his own imagination, adopting the most advantageous of these and arraying them around himself. He dreamed up heavily forested plateaus, riven with gullies and gorges, he dreamed up nightmare jungles and typhoon-driven seas squatting beneath blank equatorial skies. He set out each scene in different layers of his dream-reality, and he lured the Abomination into each one simultaneously before changing each scene abruptly. The creature began to stutter with the uncertainty of its surroundings, seeing Jesse multiply them and change them faster and faster, consuming the beast in its effort to comprehend the various battlefields as they flashed and swung around.

As the fiend turned and flailed Jesse began to unleash his words. At first they were few and mild, lightly disparaging the Abomination, deriding it for its lack of speech and mocking it for a king. Jesse set up childish chants that taunted and insulted the Foe as the battlefields continued to churn through their many iterations. Jesse increased the vehemence of his words very slowly, so that the monster would not revolt against them,

raising their temperature so gently that the beast would not think to jump free of the space in which it was slowly being burned.

For the sake of drama and the telling of the tale this battle should swing and shift in its fortunes. Jesse should quail under withering fire and then return fire, in a great dramatic shifting of fortunes across the battlefield.

But to say so would be to tell the story falsely. The Abomination was infinitely brutal but it was like all brutes devoid of words, and it could not dream, and it was unable to predict the winning manoeuvres of even one brave man liberated from its slave religion. Jesse had been to far worse places than the void from which this thing had slunk, and he had lost any fear of death now that love had abandoned him, and in this state Jesse reclaimed the irresistible power wielded by a man who has nothing to lose.

Jesse soon relented from his hesitation and began to devastate the foe. He increased the intensity and variety of his attacks, addressing Chixulub in lofty speech but also speaking of small denatured things, worms and slimy creatures that scuttle and cling to rocks. He multiplied his words singly and then in sentences, and he found that every phrase could admit of almost infinite permutations, and every sentence by its nature could say one of an infinite number of things. His words became a storm and then something much worse than that, a terrifying inferno of meaning that could devastate any mind in existence.

For the first time in his life Jesse was not clement. He knew the beast deserved no respect and no honesty, and that bringing

these things to bear in this confrontation would be stupidity and not honour. He also knew that Lasenex and his men had gone out to fight the creature, that they were all alone at sea, and he knew what the beast intended for his friend Lasenex especially. Jesse had always fought best when he fought on behalf of others, and for the sake of these men Jesse burned and fought violently, viciously, without restraining himself at all.

Jesse attacked the Beast with every weapon he had. Along with the mounting storm of insults and accusations he crooned to the Abomination that it was loved, that it was full of love and deserving of love, and these falsehoods burned the loveless creature in secret and terrible ways. Chixulub began to screech in outrage but Jesse crooned all the more, telling the beast that it was beautiful, that it was worthy, that he loved the Beast and that this violence was all done with love, piercing the Beast with the opposite of those words just as they were spoken, the unspeakable opposite of being worth anything at all.

Jesse mocked and abused and then sweetly cajoled, and every time the Beast turned to face a new attack it found that sortie withdrawn and a hundred new attacks launched in its place. Jesse set traps and he laughed as they were fallen into, he offered parley and indemnity and then immediately broke his undertakings. He created false selves with a thousand different faces, showing indifference and lust and desire, and as the beast struck at these faces Jesse would slash at its variegated tentacles, letting out huge gouts of vital fluid from each wound he inflicted. The Beast screeched at Jesse to make him Stand and to make him Fight but although Jesse acceded to these things in words he departed from his promises immediately.

In one last desperate manoeuvre The Abomination saw the

route to Jesse's mind, but as it reached out to devastate that place it found Jesse no longer resident there. For Jesse was wholly absorbed in the Word, which spans far more space than our conscious minds can, putting him far beyond the mind-games of this wordless, screeching creature.

Finally the creature tried to mobilise Jesse's mercy, crying out of its many eyes and pleading with him that this was brutality, that this was injustice. Jesse felt himself tempted towards mercy but he found Ruby's fierceness within him, completely blocking that way. He rejoiced to repudiate the creature in the same spirit, saying: you cry that this is Tyranny but I say to you: no, you coward, this is Judgment.

Jesse looked further at the things Ruby had taught him, and amongst those gifts he found her shining mirror of justice, reflecting all things truly without the distortions of mercy. Jesse held this mirror up and the Beast saw itself for what it was, bloating and twisting like an image in a fairground mirror, a gorgon shattered by disgust at itself, appalled to witness the true nature of its being.

The battle was won but Jesse had his own reasons to keep fighting. He had been born to this fight, and he would end it on his own terms. Jesse also yearned to release one further weapon he found hidden within him, one so unexpected and brutal that he shuddered at the thought he might use it, while trembling at the same time with his eagerness to set it free.

Jesse went down to the cold prison of his childhood and he opened the gates to that place, finally liberating what was locked within. As he did so a demented scream shook the battlefield: the cry of a demonised child, more devastating than

an earthquake and much more to be feared. The betrayed child that Jesse had been now released to cry out in anguish and devastation, the cry of every child abandoned to the horror of the widespread dark. Cries especially devastating to those who have never been born, who have not known the horror of separation, the exile that can be remediated only by death.

With this shattering cry the Abomination was condemned. It had imagined itself as the Most High and Lord over all Peoples, but in truth there was nothing within in it that could match the full extremity of humanity: the screams of a terrified child, the edicts of the brave man that this child had somehow become. Chixulub had descended to rule over a different kingdom, and although these clever apes were not matched to those extinct creatures in size or might they had in quick time arrogated the whole universe into themselves, the conscious universe surging in every direction upon oceans and oceans of words. The same universe now condemning this puerile God with those same words, mediated through the agency of a single conscious man.

Although his victory was complete Jesse did not relent from his attacks. This battlefield was made out of the lost landscape of his dreams, and in his longing for sleep Jesse was determined to linger there for as long as possible. The monster saw Jesse's resolution to remain, and that it would not be released, and that only stronger words would come out of him even though that seemed impossible. Chixulub had entered that space only by Jesse's express permission, and it could only leave by that same permission which would never be granted. Chixulub saw that there was only one route left to it, the only way out of the horror that Jesse was inflicting, the mounting compression of this deepest circle of hell.

In places without time words shake loose of their meaning, and dreams always want for the proper words of description. The surging and the retreating, our vast inner worlds and the power of our unhealed wounds. So this tale might stretch on forever; and so might it just as well be terminated immediately.

CHAPTER 16

A Lion, Roaring

THE battle against Chixulub raged across many fronts, some plain and some secret, all of them oblivious to one another as they tallied the fortunes of the fight.

The slaughter of the innocents had thwarted the monster's attempts to send madness against the people, and robbed it of its chief means of locomotion across the ocean floor. Chixulub was also halted and lamed by its battle against Jesse, this inner struggle hidden from the knowledge of the seaward men.

After the slaughter Carlos Lasenex went down to the ships. He was bound to go out to confront Chixulub by arcane laws that would take lifetimes to explicate, and by those same laws he was required to offer armistice: if the beast would return to the place where it had slumbered, if it would go under the massive weight of the oceans once more.

Lasenex knew the danger that lay in this confrontation. He had no idea how he might bargain with Chixulub, or bend the will of the creature, but he knew he must do so before the monster found other ways to rise. Knowing it might birth the necessary accomplices out of its own flesh, tearing chunks off its own

meat before breathing autonomous life into them, sending these drones into battle.

The ships were prepared and the best of them selected, crewed by the most able of the surviving men. With the sea wolves gone back to roam the ocean they were now equipped with percussive weapons, massive depth charges that could blast the monster out of the comparative shallows where it rolled and blistered and seethed.

The crew fell silent as Lasenex came down to meet them. Out of respect for his wisdom, the generalship he had shown. As he boarded his flagship his lieutenants stepped forward to offer him the best of protection: a hood of heavy golden mail, a breastplate beaten out of white gold.

Lasenex was moved by the offer of these gifts but he bowed and respectfully declined to take them, saying:

I am come to confront the monster.
To bargain with it, perhaps to redeem.
I cannot hide behind a cowl.

Thus it was. The ships sailed for many days and nights towards the place where the monster had been halted, until they came to the very edge of the place where it had originally fallen from heaven, the vast impact crater left by the conveyance that had brought it down to earth.

As the ships approached Lasenex felt the tentacles of the monster reach out towards his mind. It no longer had the agency of the slain to amplify its powers, but as the armada drew close it no longer needed that assistance. It felt its way

towards Lasenex with special urgency, the light of his unprotected mind shining out to the Beast as the source of its current ignominy, the architect of its disgrace.

Lasenex saw Chixulub surge towards him, and he saw how his mind might soon be overthrown. And so with stern words he ordered himself lashed to the forward mast, bound hand and foot and then roped securely in place, these orders being fulfilled just as the old man began to convulse and cry out with the monster's intrusions upon him.

The Argonauts stood wringing their hands as their captain fought against the beast. He cried out directions to them amongst his groans, he directed the armada forward until they were close enough to Chixulub to hear its audible rumblings, despite the protection that they wore.

The roar of Chixulub reached the mariners but it tore through the mind of Lasenex, making him strain against his restraints, overcome with his desire to escape that unspeakable howl by throwing himself overboard to be drowned.

The old man in spasms as he cried out from the mast.
Chixulub! Surrender yourself!
Shuddering and falling against his ropes.
Chixulub!
Condemn yourself!

The Abomination saw itself surrounded by many ships, crewed by men wielding blunt, barbarous weapons. It was also overrun by Jesse in other inward dimensions, where its torture was increasing exponentially.

The creature was bestowed with some sight of the future, out of a stolen sense hidden somewhere within its folds. That sense now predicted total defeat if the monster would not retreat, and no further escape should it retreat to its former prison. Chixulub was also dismayed by the moral superiority of Lasenex, who had come down to the sea to confront it without protection or a thought for his own life. The monster had no shame but it felt a sordid imitation of that emotion, a sense of its own inferior worth, enslaved by the laws of entropy in a way that these strange warm creatures were not.

So in the ultimate act of disgrace and cowardice the monster turned upon itself in its vast, inescapable greed, consuming its own flesh in a hideous gorging feast. Its many mouths tearing at its own bulk, the dire mass consuming itself and excreting itself only to have that excreta coil around to be consumed again by so many gobbling mouths.

Once this banquet had begun the beast could not restrain itself. It began to emit groans of satiety and then nausea at its own consumption as it continued to suck and bite and swallow. Chixulub vomited up strings of its own chewed flesh and then ate up that vomit again, as what served for bowels in this creature were filled past proper functioning, and then were themselves viciously consumed. The ocean began to boil like a drum, as dark clouds came down to shield the innocent from witnessing this event.

Finally there was a terrible gnashing of teeth as the many mouths of the monster found nothing further to consume, millions of teeth clashing and grinding against themselves as they fought for the final delights of self-consumption. Those teeth broke and pulverised each other as a huge belch of

satisfaction rose up from the sea floor, breaking when it reached the surface to spread rankly amongst the ships.

As this orgy came to an end Carlos Lasenex fell back against the mast. He gasped and tried to recover himself from the horrors he had witnessed, for the outward signs of these events were far less disgraceful than what Lasenex had seen inwardly. He heard the sickening silence, and then in Jesse's stolen voice the creature uttered its own epitaph, carving it in blood upon the best stone that could be found.

Yes, Old Man.
I am Decimated.
But not by you, Pretender.

With the last of its strength the monster reached into the mind of Lasenex, wringing out the doctor's consciousness so violently that his brain was torn from its moorings. Various parts of it were wrenched in inconsistent directions and Lasenex became one with the death-throes of the monster, his brain torn apart in a final act of vandalism and brutality, the blunt forces shearing this most beautiful of minds.

The seas stopped boiling and with them ceased the monster. The ships sat righted upon the sea again, the men who sailed in them breathless for their reprieve.

But there was no reprieve for Lasenex. The Argonauts cut their captain from the mast and they carried him into the bowels of the ship, they laid him on the pallet they had improvised and they wept for his condition. They wiped the blood from his ears and his neck, they wiped the blood out of his ruined eyes that had wept with his own blood.

Lasenex shuddered as they tended to him, crying out for friends long dead and for the mother who had brought him into the world. He begged his mother not to suffer him to be born, he begged for his life to be ended before it was given to him. He begged and wept as he died, his tears of b l o o d resolving themselves into salt tears as his eyes closed for the final time.

In the evening the Argonauts bring their fallen captain up to the deck. They pray for his soul to keep watch over their ships, to guide them into the night watch for the final time.

With praise and thanks the Argonauts consign the old man to the deep, to the sea that is jealous and will not give up her dead. The sun reddens as it sinks and puts triumphal colours in the clouds, and against the calm sea there opens the vast vault once more, the first stars shining out as heralds of another night, for all of us made sailors upon this worldly sea, all poor eastward passengers who must sail into the night once more.

In the silent heavens there is no clamour for this man or for any other. No man torn from the world or yet to be given breath. The skies remain passive and alien as men look skyward through their tears, their pleas for intercession going unheard amongst the heavens. That will send such beasts against them.

That remain indifferent to the outcome, to the fortunes of battle and the losses sustained, to the bravery and the broken hearts and the endless suffering of men.

PSALM FOR THE NIGHT SEASON

ALTHOUGH brave men might despair they are never truly abandoned, and they may quickly retrieve themselves by observing the proper form of prayer: *make me to understand wisdom secretly* -

For Wisdom waits patiently to answer the supplicant. She responds without hesitation to any right man who prays. She seeks him out just as he calls upon her, she goes seeking amongst the children of men to see if there are any who might understand -

She is called by many names for she is devoid of a common name. She is called for her succour and her good counsel, these fragmentary glimpses of her. The devout seek her in the cool places of the earth but she is also of the desert places. To the frozen wanderer she is Mother of the Snows, to lost seafarers Star of the Sea -

There are some who have sought for her all of their lives, whom she now cherishes as her sons. For these she glows fiercely in her loving protection, for the man who has the heart to call upon her constantly -

She moves beside him as he wanders in his waking state, she coils around him as he seeks the solace of sleep. Her compassion for him is perpetual, she will never forget him or leave him orphaned. Even if he should stumble, even if he should fall -

She whispers truths to him so that he might understand, she tells him wise things so he might stagger onwards to the finish of his journey. She bestows all of these gifts so that he might

turn and bring comfort to her People -

She loves especially those rare boys who grow properly into men. She does not hide her sensual parts from these, she calls to him like a Lover and not like a son, with all of the desire that has hitherto been hidden from him -

Knowing that men's hearts respond especially to this. Knowing that if she calls to him as a Lover then he might comfort her People like a Lover, and not simply like a valiant, fallen son -

BOOK VI
(6 Lupa)

CHAPTER 17

A Season In Hell

TO each the responsibility of their role, and although the task of confronting the Abomination might have been allocated to any, it was a duty that was in fact reserved to the resourcefulness of men. No knowledge of it was given to any other, not the ranked sisters of Lupa or their brightest Ruby Tuesday.

As the world heaved in that confrontation Ruby sank and smouldered alone. She grieved for Jesse but she also raged against him, oblivious to the danger that he faced. Her heart turned against itself also until it was completely arid, a cold desert bereft of any feelings for Jesse or any care for herself.

In her suffering Ruby still managed to sleep, entering that dream-state whether the world woke or the world slumbered. She dreamed of many things including her powers remaining intact, she dreamed of things she owed by blood fealty to her sisters that not even a broken heart could abrogate.

Ruby was no stranger to the lucid dreaming that holy men describe, the potent conscious dream-life that acolytes covet

more than waking sight, waking power. For thus were many of the deeds of Lupa transacted, in dream-space with far more texture than real space, especially in the identification of evil and the righting of the ledgers of the world.

So on one moonlit night Ruby found herself looking around the same place where she had driven with Jesse, the gravel car park where he had scintillated so wildly before going on to his death. She jogged up the rocky track without demarcation between her dreaming and her waking, interpreting the landscape with her hunting senses that rose as the moon rose. Detecting the scent that betrayed Jesse's movements along that upward trail.

As Ruby hurried on she was greeted by the soughing pines, in warmth but also in puzzlement that the man she had brought to them was gone. They would have queried Ruby on this but her body spoke it in heavy accents, and in how the light in her was dimmed. These sentinels saw that love had abandoned the young initiate, but although they would have expressed their sorrow they lacked the flesh and blood to do so, restrained as they were by the summary hardness of their bark and their branches.

Ruby clambered over boulders and she jumped fallen logs and she kept on until the slope softened and the country opened out around her. Soon she faced the granite walls of the grotto, the familiar waters and the faint luminescence that joined and sundered there.

Again the familiar movement, the swirl of phosphorescence out of its random distribution. The lights coming together to form the shapes of the Twelve, like stars dragged into galaxies and then coalescing into their glowing, familiar forms.

As the Twelve formed out of the darkness they reached out in greeting to Ruby Tuesday, only to feel their touch rejected as soon as it reached her. The Twelve churned to feel her grief, but before they could properly comprehend the changes that had come upon Ruby she asked for permission to speak, and then began to speak without waiting for a reply.

I have come to tell you things, she said.
Of which you have some notice.
But you do not know: the horror.
You do not know what will be required of you.

The Twelve were not used to being addressed so directly. They demanded the proper courtesies from Ruby but her heart was lost, she was mad with sorrow and she ploughed on directly with what she had come to say. Telling of her redemption of Jesse from the place where he had languished, witnessing the means of his redemption by her forbidden tears.

As Ruby spoke she showed the Twelve many images that were stored up inside of her, the images Jesse had shown her as he narrated the same story. The Twelve saw the rigours of hell, they were shown piteous images of the men who suffered there. Ruby showed clear images of their faces, as young as the day of their death but now torn in agony, defaced by the

cruelty they had suffered for the love of Lupa.

The Twelve knew these men instantly because they still loved them absolutely. They also knew why these men had been condemned, having sent them into death just as Jesse had been sent, to deliver the Daughters of Levi.

The Twelve had thought death would mean safety for their beloved and they fainted to see their error exposed. They saw torment stretching out infinitely beyond time, the degradation and suffering reserved for those men who could really love, the warmth of their hearts tapped and bled out for the delight of the djinns who tormented them.

The Twelve decried these truths as they were revealed, their forms shuddering and fading as they were pierced by the horror they had caused.

Ruby, they cried out.
Say it is not so.
These, our Beloved?
They languish in this place?

Ruby nodded her head silently because these things were unspeakable, leaving just the images of the truth she would prefer not to witness. But she could speak of other things: the mitigation of these evils, the better part of the truth, the story of Jesse's redemption and how these others might be redeemed.

There is a way, she said.
The way my Jesse was redeemed.
The way that has been forbidden to us.

As she spoke these words Ruby heard a dead silence fall. The Twelve saw her prepare to utter blasphemy and all of their sorrow was stilled, as they recoiled from the heresy that Ruby was about to speak.

As the silence deepened Magdalene moved forwards from the centre of the Twelve, gliding in silence and majesty until she stood directly in front of Ruby. The grief within her matching Ruby's own grief, the same shame and sorrow that Ruby had felt for consigning Jesse to the grave. But the heart of Magdalene was overrun with weeds, the chains of two thousand years grown heavy with rust, sinking her heart until there was no prospect it could be raised up again.

You pine, Magdalene said. You suffer, as do we all. Have I not warned you? Have I not always said, that this is the consequence of presuming to love Men?

Ruby went to say what was on her heart but it was denied before she had the chance to begin it.

No, said Magdalene. It is unthinkable. Our law has always been thus. You wept and your love was raised but he was only recently dead. I have been in my grief for two millennia, Child. And I will mourn for thousands of years more.

Not if you weep for Him, said Ruby.

Impossible, said Magdalene.
To release my grief, my tears?
It would tear the Earth from its hinges.
Unseat the world and all of our places within it.

As the sisters heard these words they shouted in agreement, crying out the words of the statute that had permanently stayed their tears. But Ruby would not be moved by these reproaches, not even when they cried out to accuse her of heresy, insanity.

There is no other way, Ruby said. These men languish because of us, because of their love for us. They cry out and there is nobody to stand for them, nobody who can redeem them.

Ruby held her heart open and the sisters looked within, and they saw how pierced she was by Jesse's rejection of her. They cast these stones against her but even against such cruelty Ruby found she had an answer.

My love Jesse wounds me because he is in the world. He breaks my heart, but he no longer lies in torment. Would you condemn these men for fear of a broken heart? Would you abandon Him, and His brother, the bravest and most blameless of them all?

Gradually the Twelve replaced their cries of outrage with sighs of sorrow, sighs of wonder that there might be some way to reverse these evils.

Magdalene however remained like stone. Her love was the last to have been interred, and it was for His sake that Lupa had finally separated their lives entirely from Men. She heard Ruby say that their statutes might be amended, but her ancient grief denounced these claims without any consideration.

Eventually Magdalene rose and came towards Ruby once more, wanting to put this madness to an end.

Very well, my child.
You may try the gates of my heart.
But you will find, as others have found.
The sorrow within me sunk and turned to stone.

Magdalene closed her eyes and Ruby did the same.

Ruby gently sought a way into the great one, past all of her held-back tears, but there were terribly hard places within Magdalene and Ruby found no way to enter. Her heart was walled up with the fibrous layers unique to old grief, a barrier built out of sorrow and hardened by self-reproach, holding out against Ruby as she sought to illuminate these protective layers of darkness upon darkness.

Ruby softened her heart and felt her way towards that walled-up space, moving slowly to unbrick it piece by piece. As she worked Ruby also began to sing, quietly at first, soft simple notes with short words that repeated themselves, much like the first songs Mother Ruby had sung to her when she was newly born.

Ruby sang until she saw movement, then watched as the figure of a young woman was revealed. She seemed scarcely out of her childhood, huddled in the immanent dark and

turned away from Ruby, holding herself tightly against the weight of what she had witnessed, the horror of what she had caused.

Ruby softened her voice further and began to sing directly to the young woman, a lullaby devoid of any direct words that might cause her to recoil. Ruby infused her song with gentleness and intimate forms of address, wishing to make her love known to the girl, to coax her out of her terrified turning inwards.

As Ruby sang the girl gradually released her hold on herself and her head began to turn, stealing quick glances at Ruby before turning away again. Ruby sang to her in a voice she had been waiting to hear for her whole life, and the girl wanted to open to that song despite the fear that closed her in. She began to wail softly in tune with Ruby's song, singing her own fear of being hurt again, but Ruby sang on with words of love and comfort and her song was irresistible. To this girl and to all of the lost and the lonely, especially those lost when they are so young.

The girl tried to hold herself back but her heart swelled and swelled, until in a sudden rush all of her fear was released. She turned and cried out to Ruby, and after hesitating for one final moment she ran straight into her arms. Ruby caught the girl and held her and comforted her, in the reprieve that had been denied to her for the past two thousand years.

Ruby held the girl in that layer of reality, but out in other layers of space and dreams she also held the slight form of Magdalene, now reconciled into the tenderness of her youth. Her great heart trembled there in Ruby's arms, gathering in

sorrow and relief as she began to weep.

At first Magdalene's grief was shallow, halting, her lost tears baulking as they emerged into the light. Ruby held her steady through this stage of her release, slowly taking the great soul down through the layers of her defences until she was united with her core sorrow, that was of all sorrows, that had been by the Man of Sorrows made.

Magdalene wept to open the halls of her past life. She saw blood and tears, so bright after so long, she remembered the deep eyes that had stared into hers and how she had battled to resist Him. She sighed to remember failing in those efforts and kissing His soft lips, the desire within both of them mounting to condemn the world.

Magdalene saw the horror and the pity, the fate of the brave men destroyed by her desire. She saw Jesus retching and convulsing and perishing, just as Jesse had done, she saw brave Judas going out to the sacrifice only he could make. Out of his love for his twin brother, going out to protect the sisters who had no other protection. She saw herself dazed and numb as these things unfolded, unable to cry out or to resist the bitter fruits of her love.

Finally Magdalene saw where both of these men had languished since that time, the horrors they had endured for the last two thousand years. She sought a last escape from these truths but Ruby held her steady, the truth rising and confronting Magdalene as she fell back from her denial. Leaving her with the blunt truth: her hopeless love for these men, her unbearable shame and grief at the suffering she had caused them.

As she was recovered to these things Magdalene broke free of her constraints. Her soul expanded outwards and upwards and Ruby lost her grip, falling back on the hard rock as Magdalene's soul soared to resume its true form.

There was a huge shellburst of golden light and suddenly everything was Mary, the wind and the waters were Mary, the sheer rock and the skies above the grotto. All those present gasped to see the towering golden form of Mary Magdalene, freed from the dark garments of her grief, now become a mighty tower as tears fell from her, huge peals of sorrow falling and ringing out like golden coins, her reclaimed tears pushing her past grief into the pure power of outrage and indignation. The world shook as she decried the treatment of these men, as she gave herself over to mourning what had been lost to her.

The outrage in Mary built and shuddered and all those watching began to tremble in fear. They saw the vast might of her soul as it built, and they feared the immediate fulfillment of her warning: the earth laid to waste, the world torn from its hinges.

But the world was not condemned. Magdalene gathered in her golden power and then without warning she crashed down through the permeable barrier between this world and the next. Worlds shook and kingdoms fell but it was only the kingdom of Hades that was made untenable. Magdalene smashed through the houses of the prisoners and those walls came tumbling down, setting all of the captives free, routing and destroying the ghouls who had tormented them for so long.

One by one the Beloved of Lupa were liberated from their suffering. Remus and Ham were liberated, poor murdered Abel who was interred so long ago. Each man rose and his soul flamed into shape before the women of the grotto, and each by each the Twelve were joined with their lost love. These men no longer had earthly bodies to resume but their souls were completely intact, and they remained in the world just long enough join with the soul of their lover before both were gratefully released, going on to those places where lovers will be reunited after their separation by death, places that have no mention in the craven books of history.

The joining of these souls was done in rapture and deliverance but this was nothing compared to what happened next. Ruby sighed to see Jesus rise up out of hell to take his place beside the towering form of Mary, shedding His heart-light against a universe of stars, His light cruelly stolen from a world so in need of illumination. Jesus spread his arms out against the firmament and joined with the twinned light shining in Mary, in such ample recompense of the love that was stolen from them.

Finally there arose one who did not have any lover, yet whose suffering is our best symbol of the depth and constancy of love. Brave Judas Iscariot, the most slandered son of the world, the self-hanged God so viciously accused for the latter part of history. Ruby saw what Judas had given, and how he had been repaid, despite how he ought to have been remembered for his great love and great loyalty. But she also saw the poor and the earnest kneeling in praise of Judas, as he hung there in their churches, and how this devotion had reached him and sustained his soul even in the deepest parts

of hell. So that he might now rise and shine forth, the sufficiency of his silver now transmuted into gold.

Then it was done. Magdalene embraced both of these men, with one touch healing the wounds of two thousand years. As their souls soared in holy trinity they looked back to Ruby in gratitude and relief, hoping to provide her with some consolation but their souls were called onwards, and before they could say a single word they shimmered and then disappeared, going out of this world forever.

The night was quiet again, and the phosphorescence sank back to swirl without any form. Leaving Ruby alone on the hard rock of the grotto, just as she was left on the night that Jesse had died, having reprieved so much sorrow but not her own sorrow.

Ruby sat slumped and disconsolate. She saw her life receding from her as she tried to press on alone, just as Jesse's life was forfeit to his loneliness and longing for her. These strange cruelties of the corporeal world, where twinned souls are kept separate for the harvesting of their tears.

Ruby found herself wishing that she not redeemed Jesse, and that she herself had perished in the attempt. So that he might have been redeemed by Mary Magdalene, so that the two of them might throw off the bonds of earthly sorrow and go to on to those places where separation is unknown.

But that was no longer for Ruby to decide. And so she forced herself to get up and begin her trudge back downhill, moving on in her grief from one solitary place to another.

CHAPTER 18

Poured We Libations

IN one of the manifold places where it is possible to wake Carlos Lasenex opened his eyes. He was disoriented but he felt no fear, feeling certain he was in a safe place although it had not been his choice to come there.

Lasenex gradually regained his sight, and he was opened to other vision concerning who was sitting with him in this place. Who had gently woken him, who was watching over his soul as it righted itself to its surroundings.

Dr Lasenex.

The voice very familiar although the speaker remained unseen.

Doctor.

Lasenex suddenly realised he was not dreaming.
Where… where am I?
You're with me, Doctor.
Mr Quinn?
Yes, Jesse said.

And please, Dr Lasenex.
After all we have been through.
I think it's probably time you started calling me Jesse.

Lasenex struggled to orient himself towards Jesse's voice but each way he turned that voice was directly in front him, soothing him and reassuring him. Jesse told the old man there was nothing to fear, assuring him that the present space between them was only temporary space, that it would be resolved out presently into some greater, better resolution.

Eventually Lasenex relented from his struggle and sank back with a sigh.

What has happened? he asked.
To me, Jesse.
What has happened to me?

Jesse was silent, as he thought of how to answer.

And my men?
Lasenex groaned to think of them, alone upon the vast sea.
What has happened to my men?

To this question Jesse reached out quickly, saying: they are safe, Doctor. You know the ones who were lost. The others survive. They did not come to harm.

With that reassurance Lasenex relaxed further into the space he shared with Jesse, who now seemed to stand beside him, both of them facing forwards with their shoulders aligned.

Lasenex was slowly restored to his memories of the hunt: the seas churning and boiling, his final confrontation with Chixulub. He saw the Sunken God feast upon its own flesh, he saw that ghastly banquet and how the Beast had been destroyed.

O Jesse.
I see Him.
I see Him… Consumed.
Yes, said Jesse.
I see the manner of it, said Lasenex, I see you face him…

Lasenex was then provided with absolute vision of the confrontation between Jesse and the Abomination. He saw his ships and his men going out in a flanking manoeuvre, to cover Jesse's soul until the main battle could be joined. He saw Jesse unflinching in how he had faced the beast, he saw Jesse excoriating the creature without pity or hesitation and the Word by which he prevailed.

How did you know? asked Lasenex.
Jesse smiled at the question.
I didn't, Doctor.
You made the path for me.
I travelled down it to face Him.
Other than that, I just kind of made it up.

And He is gone?
Yes, said Jesse.
He is gone.

At these words Lasenex relaxed completely, and he was restored to every memory of the events that had brought him

to this place. The shrieking of the creature as it passed out of existence, the feeling of own brain being sheared and torn away. Lasenex surveyed his memories of these events but he also saw them from the outside of his body, the blood flowing out of his ears and his eyes, his body thrashing violently and then slumping against the mast.

So it is true, Lasenex said.
I am killed.
Yes, said Jesse.

Lasenex rested for a moment in that knowledge, and then for some reason he began to smile a strange impish smile, letting out a gentle laugh as he did so.

You know, dear boy.
I would have preferred to live.
Some further years, perhaps.
But this death, I am sorry to say.
It comes almost as a relief.

Lasenex sank back as he spoke these words, starting to lapse out of his provisional consciousness. His soul would have ceased at that point but Jesse was charged with being his guide onwards, and so he gently roused the old man.

Dr Lasenex.
It's time to go.

I know, said Lasenex.
I see where I am bound.
My body immersed in the White Sea.
Yes.

I see the White Islands.
Yes, said Jesse. You know their name.
I do, said Lasenex.
But as strange as the world is.
I never imagined such tales might be true.

Jesse reached gently into the old man's soul, and with tremendous care he began to release each point of anchorage fastening Lasenex to this world. The doctor tensed a little as he felt himself flow onwards, like all living things do, trying to dig in to his hold upon this earthly reality. His struggle was the common struggle but Lasenex also felt there was something he had forgotten, something he needed to restore before he was called onwards.

As Jesse slowly unpinned his soul Lasenex gasped in realisation, turning back urgently towards Jesse before his soul could journey onwards.

Ruby, Mr Quinn.
Jesse halted at the sound of her name.
You must… You must not…

Suddenly Lasenex was entirely with Jesse, in the importance of what he had to say, restored for one final time to his great mind and its great rigour.

You must listen to me, said Lasenex. Everything depends upon it, Jesse, everything. If you do not listen then we may as well have not have fought.

You condemned her, Lasenex said. When you sent her away. She is wounded, Jesse, she pines and there is nothing to be

done for her. Without her nothing will be achieved, for you to be redeemed is only part of the victory.

Jesse was quiet and contrite.
I know, Doctor.
I have to make it right.
Do you see her?
Yes, said Jesse. I know where she is.

Good, said Lasenex.
You must go to her.
Bow your head to her.
Reserve nothing to yourself.
And do not waste any more time…

Lasenex faltered and his voice broke down as though he were deprived of air, and as his life ended he had only one further thing to say.

I am sorry for my strictness with you Jesse. It was only ever to teach you. If it were up to me I would have embraced you, I would have cared for you like a son. Although with what you have achieved I do not know whether I would be worthy.

I would be honoured, Dr Lasenex.
Ah dear boy.
Such respect in you, even to the end.

As the two men said their final farewells a fair wind blew through the space where they communed, blowing to absolve that space of their words and to bear the dead man onwards. As it surged the wind also shaped Carlos' soul for flight, whispering the high praise and honour reserved for those who

give of their lives for others.

As the wind drew him onwards Lasenex sighed.
It feels good, he said.
Ah. What relief.
And here it comes, the mystery…

In a cool sliding rush Carlos Lasenex passed over towards his destination. As he passed he felt all of his burdens slough off him, leaving him relieved of them and slowly rising, rising. The rigour of his mind uplifted, the other strictures he had observed without rancour or complaint.

As Lasenex flowed onwards he was absolved back into his younger self, transmuted from Old Man back though his vigorous years into his childhood once again. Although this is a common feature of death there is no way to explain the joy that rushed back into Lasenex as these changes occurred, the composite parts of his dignity deconstructing themselves back into innocence, laying out before him all the good he had worked in the world.

As Lasenex journeyed onwards he also detached from the realm of syntax and common sense, obscuring the completion of his journey and his entry into his reward. So that we may only guess at the reward of heroes passed, and so that bravery might be proved against other more cynical things, attempts to appropriate the rewards of the brave by imitating their work in the world.

CHAPTER 19

The Wages Of Sin

RUBY Tuesday was not born merciful, and neither were her people inculcated in such ways. She was instructed only in love and the opposite of love and there had been no complexity in her experience of either. The thought that love might end, in cruelty or indifference, these were the lessons of heartbreak that Ruby had never learned.

On some nights she would wake with a sudden involuntary thrill, her senses telling her that Jesse was beside her in bed. She would look around in hope and then in despair, realising that her impression of Jesse was fleeting and was not his bodily self she so craved. Ruby shook her bedding and washed her sheets but she could not erase Jesse's impression from out of her bed, or out of her soul where his largest impression lay.

Ruby's heart had been a stronghold but her defences were badly breached, and so undefended her soul began to darken. She hardly ate or drank, she tore at her hair and her skin. Mother Ruby sang to her and her grandmothers gathered around, but none of these women had tasted the poison she was dying from and had no help to give her.

Amongst all of her sorrow Ruby also burned, in her lupine insolence and pride. She could have gone back to Jesse, to ask him or to beg him, but she was restrained from such entreaties by her arrogance as much as her tenderness of heart. Ruby knew that if she overreached and was rejected again her soul might distend past the point of failure, to the point where the hitches holding her heart together could no longer be expected to hold.

When her phone rang early one evening Ruby knew who was on the line, but although she picked up eventually her troubles left her unable to speak.

Ruby?
She didn't answer.
Ruby, said Jesse.
Can we talk?

Ruby managed a noise that Jesse took as agreement.

Ruby, Jesse said.
I need to apologise to you.
For sending you away.
It was insane. I was insane but that is no excuse.
I am sorry for what I have done.

Jesse's words were spoken truly but they did not entice Ruby. The sorrow within her was shadowed by a glittering fury that threatened to engulf her as Jesse reached out, leaving not a single open route within her.

Jesse stood against Ruby's silence and consulted his deep places, waiting until the right words came to him before reaching out to her again.

Ruby, he said.
I know that I have hurt you.
I know you are terribly angry with me.
Whatever excuse I might have, I don't wish to plead it.

But please, Jesse said. For the sake of my life, and for yours. I am going to ask you to understand.

Ruby remained silent but Jesse felt something lift within her as he spoke these words. He saw small spaces within Ruby where his light might come in, and where that light once admitted might continue to stream through.

You know what you are to me, he said. What I was before I met you. I breathed and I moved but my life stood only in the desolate places. I dreamed of love to see it denied to me, I dreamed of Love because the world could not provide it.

But you came to me, Ruby. You came and you were kind to me and you asked for nothing in return. Even though it was forbidden you reached out and you comforted me, with your admiration and your praise. You refreshed my spirit, even though you knew I could give you nothing back.

And when I fell, he said.
You did not abandon me.
You washed my poor body.
You bore me upon your shoulders.
You interred me into the ground.
You sat watch until I was safely protected from harm.

And even then, Jesse said. You could have left me, you could have turned from me just as your people exhorted you to do. I was just one fallen man amongst so many, gone into the ground as it is our fate to do.

Jesse was overcome as he remembered these things. He paused to breathe and wipe tears from his face, and to steel himself against further tears before he could continue. He felt Ruby at the other end of the line, trembling and walled-up but threatening to be released, and although Jesse did not know whether that flood would be loving or lethal he continued with the speech that he was given.

Even then, Ruby. You stayed with me. You shook and you grieved and when that was not enough you broke every commandment of your kind. You wept for me, you pledged your soul in exchange for mine and the gates of Hell were opened. Ending my suffering, setting my soul free.

What man could hope for such love? Who am I, to be loved in such a way? Without you I would still be what I was: a lost soul struggling onwards without any hope, a heap of flesh battling against the predations of time.

But Ruby this is merely history.

Here are the current things I accept.
I do not deserve your forgiveness.
I do not deserve to be your man.
But I will ask you for both of these things.
And I will pay the price, no matter what it might be.

Jesse stopped speaking, with the words within him finished. He heard Ruby breathe on the other end of the line, and after a long silence he heard her gather herself to speak.

Jesse, she said.
I can't allow you to do this to me.
Not once I have given myself to you.

I know, he said.
You didn't need to send me away.
I know.

Ruby continued. I can't allow it. You can't just turn away from me, Jesse, or send me away like you did. Once I am given to you? My heart is not divisible, once it is given it is lost to me entirely.

Even if you were insane, Jesse. I could have helped you, I could have looked after you. I could have redeemed you even from that. But not that, Jesse. Not to send me away, to leave me heartbroken, to hate you with my whole heart and to hate myself even more.

I'm sorry, she said.
I have no choice.
I cannot allow that to happen to me again.

With that Ruby was finished what she wanted to say.

Jesse felt despondent but he knew that he had further words within him, and that there was hope in those words if only he could say them truly. He asked for permission to speak, and although Ruby was silent her tacit consent was given and so Jesse went on with what he had to say.

The words that Jesse spoke were softer than apology, words that approached Ruby gently and tangentially and thus found new places to enter. Even as she tried to post herself against him, to cement her decision never to speak to him again.

Jesse told Ruby many things he had stored up within him. He told her stories of his life before he met her, going back to things that had come to him as a boy, his epic daydreams as he spent so many hours alone. He described how those dreams were always of love, and he told Ruby he had not known the name of this Love or seen her face but he knew that she was small and quick and fierce and that she would one day be revealed to him. He also knew he would love this girl instantly, hopelessly, without any limit to his feelings. Jesse said he had liked certain books because the heroine reminded him of his dreamgirl, and how as he grew up he had sought her out in the real world, but although he had encountered some similarity in the girls he met he had never found her exact likeness. And how curious it was that he should know her so deeply, before he had spoken her name or seen her face or known anything about her at all.

Jesse told Ruby about the first time he had met her, the day she had come in to his office for an interview. He had known immediately that she was terribly special and strange, and he

described how further knowledge had dawned in him of the strangest thing. That Ruby in fact exceeded his dreamgirl in every facet: in her quick beauty, her fierceness and her kindness. Jesse trembled to say that from the first time he met Ruby his dreamgirl had said farewell, and although she sometimes appeared in his sleeping dreams it was only to assuage the fact that he was not able to take physical comfort with Ruby. And even in that she had slowly drifted away, perhaps to console some other lonely man now Jesse had found a woman who could take her place, and in fact exceed her, with the flesh and the blood that Ruby walked within, her complete and complex reality that seemed like the most extravagant dream of all.

Ruby remained quiet during these stories, managing to keep her heart turned away from Jesse even through his description of these beautiful dreams, with her pride of place within them.

Ruby sat recoiled but all words have their power, especially words of truth and tenderness and reconciliation, and slowly, against her own wishes, Ruby felt those words recover her and warm her and slowly cause her to open. There being no way for a right heart to resist the warmth of such words, and no reason for any right soul to do so.

And there are other parts of speech, manifest in the outside world, in part more powerful than words, with the power of direct intercession between lovers who lose their immunity to these things. As Jesse spoke his words receded in importance and Ruby was left listening only to his voice, his warm deep tones beginning to flow over her and around her and then very gradually within her. Jesse's voice thrummed and

searched Ruby out, it went into her hard places and ameliorated them, his warm tones vibrating within her increasingly as she softened and created more space for them to enter. Ruby began to tremble with his tones, to resonate with their frequency, and she found herself resonating with the whole of her body even as her mind commanded that this must not be so. She heard Jesse's breath as it drove those rhythms, and without knowledge of the fact she was also moved by the movements of his tongue, directing the air with subtle sibilance and soft pressing, the friction and releasing of friction, all of these things pressing against Ruby now she had forgotten entirely whether she wanted them to or not.

Ruby sighed and made other soft sounds and whenever Jesse fell silent she said keep talking and he would say Ruby I am finished and she would growl at him and say: I Am Not Finished. Keep Talking. And although Jesse was quite finished with his words he was also very obedient, and he found more words to say. Although the content of his words was now unimportant still they needed to be sincere, and so he told Ruby further stories, disclosing secret facts and secret wishes from his life before he met her.

Jesse found stories to tell that he thought he had forgotten, which surprised him in the telling of them, and Ruby did not hear a single word of what he said. She rode the waves of Jesse's voice as they filled her increasingly, and they caused her to burn and then burn very hot, and with his voice swelling and filling her she bore down hard against it and his voice was more than matched to that task. As she burned she squeezed her thighs tightly together but that only made it worse.

And with the softest shock Ruby saw what Jesse's voice was calling her towards, the rise of that oblivion and ecstasy, and she saw the futility of her efforts to contain the uncontainable. These throes rose up in her and she leapt towards them, and as she gasped and twisted she said no no no and was given over to ecstasy entirely.

Ruby heaved and gasped and Jesse stopped talking.
Ruby, he said.
Are you OK?
To her silence on the end of the line.

Do you want me to keep talking?
No, she eventually said.
Perhaps I could just…
Jesse.
Please just… shut up.

Ruby said nothing else and Jesse did as he was told, listening to her breathe hard as she recovered. Jesse heard Ruby take a couple of deeper breaths, pulling herself together until she regained enough composure to speak.

Jesse, she said.
I need you to listen to me.
OK Rubes.
Are you listening?
She continued without waiting for his reply.

Your words are fine Jesse James but they do not absolve you. Your voice resounds in me like the song of angels, but it does not reprieve you of your crimes.

Ruby settled herself further, and continued.

Jesse. You don't know what it's like. You feel your love for me but you don't inhabit it like I do. I feel things that have been forgotten by the world, insane and prohibited things.

You don't know what it's like. You can't imagine feeling love like that, loving someone the way I love you. My love is not different from death because it endures like death, and if my love were to end it would leave my soul and the world in ashes.

Jesse's cheeks burned with shame as he listened to these words, but as he went to declare that shame and perhaps also to soothe Ruby she silenced him immediately.

No Jesse. You don't get to tell me what I should feel. You have no idea what it is to burn this way, to be burned down. You can abandon me but I can only burn for another thousand years, deeper and deeper underground.

You ask the price of my forgiveness? Beloved you already know: I am a creature of reckoning and retribution. I do not forgive, and I very easily condemn. My name is the name of Judgment, transacted in the currency of blood.

So here is my demand to you, Jesse James.
Come to me, to be tested.
I will not forgive you.
But I will give you the chance to atone.

Do you doubt me? Then you are foolish, my love. You offer me words and the seductions of your voice but it will be the

whole of your body that will be tested, if you come to me.

So come to me, Beloved. Do it now. I will not tolerate your objections. Come to me as quickly as you can. Don't bother to shower. Do not dress up for me, your clothes will only get torn.

If you mean what you say, Jesse James. You will be mine or you will be nobody's. That is what it means, to be loved by a woman like me. Bear all of your strength to me, even in the knowledge that it may not be enough.

Ruby finished what she had to say and sat quietly, listening for Jesse's voice on the other end of the line. Even though she knew that he was no longer there, that he had ended the call in obedience to her demands and was running to her through the darkness just as she had commanded him.

In her deep heart Ruby saw Jesse coming towards her, in her pledged soul that would always know when this man was on her horizon. She felt him gather like a sun and speed through the night towards her, his arrival that would precede the majesty of the dawn. At the merest thought of it, the light and the heat within his body, Ruby was released into her ecstasy once more.

CHAPTER 20

Homeward Bound

AS her ecstasy subsided Ruby waited for Jesse, sitting quietly in her little house that had only received this man once, yet in its timbers and its fixings still yearned to receive him again.

Ruby sought to maintain her fierceness against Jesse but all of her judgment and indignation had drained away the instant he responded to her demands, the moment he submitted to the penance she would require of him.

Ruby struggled hard but her efforts were wasted. She could not harden her heart, and the more she tried the more she felt it break open: for this man whom she so loved, this man who had by his love changed her soul completely. Leaving Ruby now susceptible to Jesse's softer sense of justice, some of the moderation and clemency that had instructed him for his entire life. Putting a stay on her own innate severity, the vengeance she had brought into the world and never thought to temper.

Ruby was stubborn and she maintained her efforts until she heard the soft knock at her door. Her heart swelled at the sound and she knew her efforts to repudiate Jesse were doomed. She opened the door gently and sighed with the

futility of her attempts, seeing her poor love standing there soaked with the night rain, looking at her in contrition and in hope and most of all in love, in his shapeless hospital garments that were not much more than pyjamas, an odd shoe on either foot.

Jesse went to say the things he had prepared but Ruby interrupted him with a sigh and said: Oh Jesse. What are you wearing? Jesse smiled with his eyes cast downwards at himself and he said: I know, Rubes. I look ridiculous. I just wanted to come to you as quickly as I could.

Jesse went to say other things but as he looked at Ruby he saw the petals of her heart open out towards him, showing him that words were now completely unnecessary. He had pondered as he ran what he might plead, if she would give him that opportunity, knowing that what he had done to Ruby was never done against her, that his actions had been to protect her even though he had been insane. But these truths were written on his heart and in his wet hair and on each one of his mismatched shoes, and he knew as he stood there that Ruby understood everything and accepted everything, and that there was no need for him to explain anything anymore.

Ruby took Jesse by the hand and led him through her little house, feeling it surge to receive him again. She took him to the bathroom where she began to run a bath, and without any words Ruby undressed Jesse slowly, taking care not to abrade any of his unhealed wounds.

When the bath was run Ruby led Jesse down into the water, and she washed his body with every care and every comfort. Jesse felt the relief of the warm waters, enriched with Mother

Ruby's unguents, the washcloth cut from a cloth specially consecrated to this task.

As Ruby bathed Jesse she felt the hard lines left in him from his confrontation with Chixulub. She also felt down to the wounds he had suffered with the death of his friend Lasenex, his inner stripes matching the wounds he bore on his body. Ruby felt how Jesse had triumphed against the monster, the totality of his victory, and how he had battled not only with his own gifts but also the gifts that she had bestowed on him. Ruby swelled out softly to think how much Jesse had been changed by her, how the justice he had executed in that victory owed more to her justice than his own.

Ruby tended to Jesse but she did not deny herself the pleasure she took in caressing this man once again. She stroked the broad seat of his skull and the neck that held it up, she followed his bent nape down to where the thews of it ran into his shoulders. Feeling the broadness of him with her slender hands. Feeling through that the indomitable spirit that had always lodged within him.

As she bathed Jesse and he submitted gratefully Ruby felt her great soul finally give itself over to him. She felt it break open beyond hope of closing again, and amidst the bones of her anger and her retribution Ruby reached out to Jesse to show him for the first time in his life what comfort really was, and what was Love, this man who had languished for so long in Gethsemane that he had forgotten there might be other gardens, other kinds of passion.

As he was washed and soothed and loved wordlessly the constant blue light in Jesse mixed with a soft emerald glow

that began to shine in his heart. The room was soon suffused with the most astonishing aquamarine brilliance, growing to the point where the waters and the light merged, the bathroom transforming into some fabled underwater kingdom, an Atlantis rippling and shining coextensively with Jesse's heart and soul. Ruby sighed to be immersed in the cool sea-light shining out of Jesse, out of the caresses that she would always give to him.

With Jesse bathed and dried Ruby took them both into her bedroom. She asked Jesse to lie down and he did not refuse, and as she got into bed he lay there thankfully beside her. Ruby was still fierce and she bit Jesse as she had previously, but the touch of her teeth was now very gentle, a reminder of her fierceness and her vengeance and what it had been provoked by. She grazed his skin softly in correction for sending her away and Jesse sighed and said again: I am sorry Ruby. She softened at that and withdrew her teeth and nuzzled him instead.

The two lay together quietly as their love built in them again. Jesse reached for Ruby and she turned to him like the turning of a planet and here we must leave them, in this night where their love will be soft beyond the softness of any words, and slow to the point that it could not be said to be lovemaking, or any other kind of love that had previously come into the world. A love made infinitely warm and infinitely light, shaped secretly beyond the reckoning of words, and also shaped and strewn with newly improvised words of love, some spoken and some remaining unspoken.

And there were spoken simply their names.
Ruby.

Kiss me.
Jesse.
Kiss me.

Amidst their endless requests for kisses.

Kiss me now, she says.
Kiss me back.
Without there being any need to ask.

His kisses healing her, as they always had.
Her kisses transforming his wounds into gold.

So many night-secrets buoy up the turning of the world. So much healing done without count of it being kept. On such nights of such love there turn many pages in the books of our lives, and there are written many further pages by the shapes our bodies inscribe. Not corresponding to any other inscription. All bound securely within the vast Book of Love that may one day be set down, by a heart broken badly enough to need its secret medicine.

All created out of these joinings together.
The inheritance we all know to be ours.
Which is why we all seek.
Which is what we will return to.
When we finally find our way back home, *Masha'Allah*.

CHAPTER 21

People Get Ready

AFTER their night of love and recompense Ruby slept deeply and forgetfully. She reclaimed the deep parts of sleep that grief had denied to her, and in their recovered embrace she slept so deeply that her heart barely beat within her at all.

Jesse did not sleep. He lay beside Ruby feeling glad to be awake, her body pressed against his body being better than any dream. His cool blue-green glow illuminated Ruby as she dreamed, and over his customary gentleness there shone a new and hawk-like aspect, his light going out as watchlight to protect Ruby as she slept beside him.

Ruby's dreams had long been dark but these were new dreams, of Jesse now restored to her and everything that would result. In one dream Ruby stole up silently behind Jesse, reaching inside of him to steal his heart, popping it into a sack like some cheeky version of Santa Claus. She let some suspense build before planting his heart and the most enormous tree shot up out of the rocky ground, spreading its canopy and reaching down over them, sprawling with apples: juicy and red and heart-shaped, delicious.

As Ruby dreamed she also shone out with the deep red light that was the hereditary marker of her soul. Jesse felt that light further augment his powers just as he felt the ongoing amelioration within Ruby, the balancing up of their respective strengths, bringing them towards a resweetened concept of what right judgement might be, the powers each of them might wield now they were recovered to one other.

As Jesse felt this exchange finalise and cement itself he knew there was nothing more for either of them to hide, and no hope for either of them should fate or death seek to separate them again. For they were now of One Body, and they were of One Blood, and to part them would be to cleave a single thing into separate and unsupportable parts.

So let him say, who would bring glad tidings to Zion, and to the cities of Judah: Behold! For truly she was the vine and he was the branches, he the deep roots, she the tender bloom that rises amongst the vineyards of En Gedi.

Ruby woke late, feeling restored by her sleep in a way that she had never felt. Her sleep was always watchful against the terrors of the night, but Jesse had been her watchtower for the night past and so her sleep was long, forgetful, undivided.

Jesse kissed Ruby as she swam back up out of sleep. It was a

deep kiss that could have continued but before their bodies could dive back into love Jesse hauled himself back, asking Ruby whether she knew about the things that her dreams had taught him.

Ruby was puzzled by this question and Jesse did his best to explain. What she had imparted to him as she slept beside him, in dreams so plain he could see them unfold before him like films projected in the darkness, with their clear notice of events that were soon to come about.

Jesse told Ruby that the things cemented between them were not only private things: that their love and reconciliation held consequences for the outside world. Things that would flow out of their joining together, and endless further things to come once they were further joined. Ruby asked with a playful smile how much further they could be joined, and Jesse laughed softly and said he was unsure of how to answer but he knew there was more to come.

Jesse spoke other truths. He spoke of myths about the beginning of the world, saying as Ruby nodded that there are true beginnings but also false starts. He told of badly born things that might divide into parts antagonistic, and the evil that would inevitably flow from that antagonism. Jesse spoke of the long enmity between men and women, what had been lost because of that, and the fact that greater and greater numbers of men and women seemed to preach this same hatred in order to profit thereby. Jesse spoke of the losses that had been inflicted on both men and women equally, especially upon loving people who were in their deep hearts far more unified than they were set apart.

Jesse finished speaking and listened while Ruby told him other things, related facts confirmed by her fluent wisdom that Jesse had never known. She spoke about the Great Truth: that any myth could be reversed, no matter which way it pointed, and indeed in this circular universe every myth strained to return to the way it once was. Ruby said that although evil now flourished there was no regime that could stand forever, and the innate mutability of things was the chief salvation of the world.

Jesse asked Ruby to explain the story of Adam and Eve, how one could understand a god who would seek to divide men and women, driving them out of Paradise for such a tiny sin. Ruby said that this was just one story, one part of one song, and that there were many other songs within her cutting the other way. Telling how the Two might be reconciled to one other, how they might cast the Trickster God out of the Garden and give their hearts to one another once more.

Ruby had always known these things and yet she learned them anew as she described them to Jesse, weeping Eve's original tears as she witnessed her suffering and exile. Jesse listened until Ruby's face shone, hushing her gently and wiping her tears away. He kissed her and said there was no longer anything to mourn for, and Ruby nodded as her lips burned and she said: I know, Jesse. I know.

As Jesse soothed her Ruby thought further along the lines of her Song, and she saw from those lines that there was one final thing required of her. She felt some fear in doing it, exactly as her Song foretold, but she was very courageous and she moved closer to Jesse, putting her arms around him, releasing her soul into the custodianship of his soul as they lay there in

the early morning.

Now Jesse had known Ruby before, and even possessed her body, but there was nothing to prepare him for this gift of her Sacred Heart. The doors to her soul clanged opened and Jesse was ushered though, into a space known by many names including the Palace of his True Reward. Jesse was seated there with great ceremony and he was crowned King, and he knew victory and he knew splendour and he knew Kingdom. With Ruby at his right hand and Jesse at her left, his power also her power and the path that they should tread.

And they shone.

Eventually Jesse came back to his senses. Without parting from Ruby he moved slightly back from her, turning very slightly to take up his position at her side.

Ready? Jesse asked.
I'm ready, she said.
He squeezed her hand.

My darling Ruby Tuesday.
She burned at the sound of his voice.
The very best, at the very last.
Burning for his words, what his voice could do to her.

With Ruby addressing him in her turn.
As: poor old Jesse James.
My King, she said.
Your King, he said, tears welling in his eyes.

Jesse took a few moments to compose himself, and then he

smiled and squeezed Ruby's hand, smiling even more broadly as she squeezed him directly back.

OK then.
If we're going to do this.
And not just sit around weeping?
Let's go, he said.

OK, she said.
Let's go.

I love you.
I love you too.

OK then.
Let's go.
Ready?

Let's go.

EPISTLE

1 To my sisters and my brothers: by the grace of the Original Covenant, the miracle of the Stayed Waters and the recovered Dominion of the Land.

2 I set down these things in accordance with what has been requested of me, by the Two who have enabled it to be so. My witness to the origins of the Light that has come into the world, the events of the First Day and the First Night when the Light first came amongst the People.

3 This is not any Gospel I would declare to you but merely the witness of my senses. Should my testimony differ from the facts of your own witness then let not a single letter of this prevail. For the Light cannot be proved by mere proclamation as to its fierceness or its brightness, but rather by what it has illuminated, by shining itself into.

4 Thus is my witness. I had walked for many miles, across grassland and then harder country than that, having set out according to a voice resounding in my heart, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

5 I met with many others in the throes of the same journey, weary and foot-sore but without a word of complaint, even from the little children who walked alongside them.

6 Around the evening of the third day I saw many paths converge in the wilderness, leading a great throng to gather together in the lee of the Signal Mountain.

7 In my eagerness for a sign even the shape of the mountain spoke to me: my antipathy to my own self carved like those poor waterless slopes, by persistent rivulets of my own unwept tears.

8 The crowd milled about in thirst and hunger. Some pilgrims felt their courage fail and they set up a cry saying: we have been deceived! We were led here by a demon! And yet there were others who calmed these fears saying: if there is a purpose to our journey it must soon become apparent, and if we have walked

here in error then our feet shall know the way back.

9 I cannot say for how long we stood upon the plain, the same doubts assailing me as they assailed all of the faithful. I moved forwards through the throng and I saw only dismay, growing as the night fell and the light was extinguished from amongst the People.

10 I am not too proud to confess: I was greatly discouraged by what I saw. I also confess my resolve to quit and go back, as soon as I reached the head of the throng. I also confess: I intended to exhort the People to do the same, to spare themselves from the madness that had led us out there to die.

11 As I reached the front of the crowd I saw the Two, who had ascended the Signal Mountain by some secret route. They emerged before us at the head of a high escarpment, looking out upon the multitudes that were gathered there before them.

12 The Two did not beguile the crowd with words, or with miracles animating inert matter. The Two merely joined in a passionate embrace, folding their bodies together and also joining their souls.

13 Suddenly there came a tremendous wave of light and heat, the mountain and the plain convulsing together to cast the faithful down. I fell down to writhe in the dust along with my fellows and I was taken with a shocked and woken feeling, my heart beginning to swell against itself, opening the barricades of my soul.

14 And I felt a host of spirits leave me –

15 Dear friends I cannot declare whether these were autonomous spirits or merely my own demons, made out of my own greed and despair. For how should I say? They came out of me regardless, my soul sealing itself against them to deny them further entry.

16 As I came back to my senses I was induced never to get up from that delightful first contact I had ever felt with the Earth. Belonging wholly to this realm, and not to some other fabricated

realm. And in this my first communion with the flesh I felt the tremendous sweetness of being alive, in this wholly unlikely sliver of life between the terrifying extremes of the cosmos.

17 For what insanity is it, to mortify the flesh? This madness wrought by all of the Old Religions. To accuse this sweet, tender skin and blood? To deny the sheer agility and delight, the fabulously improbable nature of it? To slander every sweetness it has to offer?

18 Friends do not think I was innocent of this slander. All of the posturing I had done, yoking myself to an insane God, the greed that made me contort my body into shapes it was never meant to assume. I broke open my energy centres, hungry to feed on them, I lusted after power and I was infested all the more.

19 In all of these sins: I was the greatest among you. I venerated the Void and I proclaimed silence to be golden, I denigrated the Word and gave over my tender flesh to every djinn that creeps and possesses and deceives.

20 We were told that we were wretches and worms, all such degenerate accusations. We were led around by chimeras and pillars of fire, by djinns masquerading as Prophets and as the Risen Christ. We esteemed the madness of the Revelator, the pitiful insanity of Saul.

21 How easily we were deceived! To believe that a single trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, or that one act of brutality resulted in justification and life for everyone!

22 So too were we exhorted to wait, but for what? A false hope and a broken promise, a man who died and never rose, and out of that every horror that has since enslaved the world.

23 Even the falsehoods spoken about The One. I saw plainly that two are better than one, for when one falls the other may uplift her companion. Though one might be overpowered, two can withstand the oppressor. And with such power in two, then what of three? Or more than that? They shall twine into a cord that shall not easily be broken.

24 On that day there was complete restitution for the many who had gathered. The peacemakers among us were blessed, the bereaved and the lonely were blessed. Blessed were those who had been beaten down, who were slandered, blessed even those afflicted with bitterness against their fellows. We were blessed to inherit the Earth, as we had always done, and by this blessing all of us were comforted, all of us were redeemed.

25 Brothers and sisters you will know these truths I declare, in your hearts that now brim full of mercy. Because we were shown mercy. Because we came into this world pure of heart and have longed to return to that state, lacking only the signposts that would direct us back to our original state of grace.

26 Night fell amongst the people but the Light did not depart. Each one of us rose like a star against the darkness, shining out in a vast array of colours, all of us astonished to see the long night of ignorance banished by the coming of the Light.

27 Now my sisters and brothers I would ask you to attend to this part of what I am given to say. For there abounds cheap talk and gossip about the Ascension of the Two, by columns of fire or by chariots wreathed in the same element, the same superstition that has always seduced the credulous.

28 I tell you solemnly: none of these things happened. Rather than usurp some high place above the People, as had the jealous spirits before them, the Two merely uncleaved from each other. They uncoupled to hold hands, as simple a gesture as that, walking down on their human feet to descend the Signal Mountain.

29 As the soft lights swirled and the people embraced I saw the Two walk towards me. I thought to kneel or prostrate myself but I was held there upright in my human dignity, looking into their smiling eyes.

30 As I smiled back I felt myself requested: Tell this to the People. I would have protested my incapacity and asked with what words but they merely smiled at

me. Comfort the People. And I was infused with the incipient Word, the assurance that right words would come to me so that I could set them down.

31 I trembled as the Two passed on either side of me, rejoining with each other as they walked away through the crowd. Leaving me with the simple injunction to set down these words, these lessons that I now see I have always known by Heart.

32 Dear friends there is no need to admonish you against your own beliefs, or to claim any primacy for this my message to you. My own words may be doubted but not what has been effected by the Word, and these pages are nothing more than signposts upon the path, some comfort to the weary traveller who yet presses on alone.

33 So much has been written of faith, the victory of faith over the law, but in truth both of these strictures have been overcome. I do not exhort any of you to believe but merely to look, charging you as I do so: guard what has been entrusted to you, your greatest and most god-like part, the sovereign capacity for doubt that secures the shining citadel of your mind.

34 For it was faith that murdered so many. It was certainty that always damned the world. In the fullness of the new kingdom brothers need not follow, and sisters need only open their eyes.

35 Dear friends I am now ended the things I have been given to say. I conclude in my hope that you will rejoice in the Good News, not simply because it was prophesied, but because it has now come to pass.

36 God's People have been delivered out of the wilderness. They have entered into the Promised Land, the original Garden of Eden out of which they were exiled so long ago. And it is in Her name that I send you these words, so you might turn to Her ways: the One True Mother, the inestimable and pure-hearted kingdom that we now know as the Earth.

37 I proclaim these things out of the fullness of my heart, with some tears but also the frank consolation that these words

might speak comfortably to Her People, and liberate those still in bondage to the perverted gods of men. Leaving others to speak of the days since we resumed our inheritance, our days now lived in heaven for there is no other one.

38 Remaining as I do so your faithful companion, and your every friend – Lilith.